

Aboriginal voices are missing from the Murray-Darling Basin crisis

Written by Bradley J. Moggridge, Indigenous Water Research, University of Canberra

The Murray-Darling crisis has led to drinking water shortages, drying rivers, and fish kills in the Darling, Macintyre and Murrumbidgee Rivers. This has been the catalyst for recommendations for a [Royal Commission](#) and creation of *two* independent scientific expert panels.

The federal Labor party has sought advice from an independent panel through the [Australian Academy of Science](#), while the Coalition government has asked former Bureau of Meteorology chief Rob Vertessy to convene a [second panel](#). Crucially, the first panel contains no Indigenous representatives, and there is little indication that the second panel will either.

Read more: [*The Darling River is simply not supposed to dry out, even in drought*](#)

Indigenous meaning

Water for Aboriginal people is an important part of survival in the driest inhabited landscape on Earth. Protecting water is both a cultural obligation and a necessary practice in the sustainability of everyday life.

The Aboriginal peoples' worldview sees water as inseparably connected to the land and sky, bound by traditional lore and customs in a system of sustainable management that ensures healthy water for future generations.

Without ongoing connection between these aspects, there is no culture or survival. For a people in a dry landscape, traditional knowledge of finding, re-finding and protecting water sites was integral to survival. Today this knowledge may well serve a broader vision of sustainability for all Australia.

While different Aboriginal Nations describe this in local ways and language, the underlying message is fundamentally the same: look after the water and the water will look after you.

Native title

In the current crisis in the Darling River and Menindee Lakes, the focus should be on the Barkandji people of western New South Wales. In 2015, the native title rights for 128,000 square kilometres of Barkandji land were recognised after an 18-year legal case. This legal recognition represented a significant outcome for the Barkandji People because water – and specifically the Darling River or Barka – is central to their existence.

Under the NSW [Water Management Act](#), Native Title rights are defined as Basic Landholder Rights. However, the [Barwon-Darling Water Sharing Plan](#) provides a zero allocation for Native Title. The Barkandji confront [ongoing struggles](#) to have their common law rights recognised and accommodated by Australian water governance regimes.

The [failure to involve](#) them directly in talks convened by the Murray Darling Basin Authority and Basin States, and their exclusion from the independent panels, are further examples of these struggles.

Over the past two decades, Aboriginal people have been lobbying for an environmental, social, economic and cultural share in the water market, but with little success.

Read more: [***It's time to restore public trust in the governing of the Murray Darling Basin***](#)

The modern history of Aboriginal peoples' water is a litany of “[unfinished business](#)”, in the

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words of a 2017 Productivity Commission report.

In 2010 the First Peoples Water Engagement Council was established to advise the National Water Commission, but was abolished prior to the National Water Commission's legislative sunset in 2014.

The NSW Aboriginal Water Initiative, tasked with re-engaging NSW Aboriginal people in water management and planning, ran from 2012 until the Department of Industry water disbanded the unit in early 2017. In a 2018 progress report the Murray-Darling Basin Authority described NSW as “[well behind](#)” on water sharing plans.

Even after a damning ABC 4Corners report shed light on [alleged water theft and mismanagement](#), the voices of the Aboriginal people of the Murray-Darling Basin were absent.

In May 2018 the federal Labor party agreed to a federal government policy package of [amendments to the Basin Plan](#), including a cut of 70 billion litres to the water recovery target in the northern basin, and further bipartisan agreement for better water outcomes for Indigenous people of the basin.

Read more: [***Explainer: what causes algal blooms, and how we can stop them***](#)

While the measures [also included](#) A\$40 million for Aboriginal communities to invest in water entitlements, a A\$20 million economic development fund to benefit Aboriginal groups most affected by the basin plan, and A\$1.5 million to support Aboriginal waterway assessments, how worthwhile are they in a river with no water?

The recent crisis emphasises the perpetual sidelining of Aboriginal voices in water management

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in NSW and beyond. Indigenous voices need to be heard at all levels, with mechanisms that empower that involvement. Indigenous communities continue to fight for rights to water and for the protection of its spirit.

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Read more <http://theconversation.com/aboriginal-voices-are-missing-from-the-murray-darling-basin-crisis-110769>