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Progressing Reconciliation through Indigenous Partnerships within Australian Water Utilities

Developing more meaningful partnerships with traditional owners

M Thomas, D McKinnis, S Brown [1]

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the deep-time connections that Traditional Owner nations (the Wadawurrung, Gulidjan, and the Gadabanud) have had with 'water' in the Corangamite catchment of Victoria. The first part of the paper describes the historical connections—forged across millennia—that the Traditional Owners have with water; so fundamental to their way-of-life in both a spiritual and cultural context. The paper also outlines a range of initiatives that Barwon Water have recently undertaken to develop stronger and more meaningful partnerships with Traditional Owners. To this end, the second part of the paper highlights some current initiatives, particularly drawing on Barwon Water's Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP), and concludes with some suggested ideas for strengthening future ties. Overall, it is hoped that this paper will be useful for other water utilities undertaking work in this area, and for informing other sectors on how to develop meaningful initiatives that—in their own small way—help contribute to wider national reconciliation efforts.

INTRODUCTION

The broad aims of this paper are twofold. The first is to continue building ongoing connections, understanding and relationships between Australia's First Peoples and today's water industry professionals. To do this, the paper devotes the first-half to exploring the First People's connection to water, including descriptions of aquaculture, depictions of traditional stories as they relate to water, and key insights from traditional elders on water management techniques and practices.[2] In this sense, this paper is about using 'water' as a means to connect and create dialogue that, in its own small way, may contribute to reconciliation. On the latter point, while this paper concerns but one small corner of the Australian continent (south-west Victoria), involving three Traditional Owner nations, and industry ('Barwon Water'), it could be viewed as something of a microcosm, and therefore applicable to other regions around the country. Like many other issues of reconciliation, it is a single patchwork within a much wider national fabric.

The second-half of the paper describes what steps Barwon Water is undertaking to build stronger and more meaningful partnerships with Traditional Owners. Notably, while the

[1] This paper was developed in consultation with the elders and members of Barwon region Traditional Owners. Special mention to Uncle Bryon Powell, Corrina Eccles and Melinda Kennedy from the Wadawurrung, Ron Arnold elder from Gadubanud, and (further afield) to Tyson Lovett-Murray and Ben Church from Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation.

[2] In this paper, the term 'water' is used to describe sources of freshwater waterways (rivers, creeks, dams, lagoons, aquifers, wetland, and estuaries) rather than salt-water or oceanic sources. Parts of this paper are also written in the past-tense to describe Traditional Owner life prior to European settlement. However, it should be emphasised that the region's traditional Owners continue strongly and proudly in the present day.

paper outlines some achievements in this area, it also recognises that there are fresh horizons and greater opportunities. In this sense, the paper is not an end-point *per se*, but rather hopes to stimulate further conversations and actions that build stronger and more productive ties. In this spirit, the paper concludes by identifying how potential future partnership opportunities may be used to strengthen the water utility role in reconciliation efforts.

PART I: TRADITIONAL OWNER CONNECTIONS TO WATER IN THE BARWON REGION

This section provides the geo-cultural context of the Corangamite catchment[3] and the general Barwon region. It initially provides a potted overview of the catchment's geography, but subsequently focuses on describing a brief history of its Traditional Owners (Wadawurrung, Gulidjan and Gadubanud nations) and their connections to water.

The Corangamite catchment, located in southern Victoria, extends from the Bellarine Peninsula in the east, to Lake Corangamite in the west, the Otway Ranges in the south, to Ballarat in the north (figure 1). With the exception of the Otways (highest elevation of 670m), the catchment consists of gently undulating terrain, most of which is today put to agricultural use. Roughly 80 per cent of the catchment's 13,300 square kilometres is in private hands, with the remaining 20 per cent publicly owned (CCMA, 2017). Increasing property prices in Melbourne combined with regional investment, are driving unprecedented growth in the catchment's major population centres of Geelong, Ballarat and Colac; as of 2017 the region's permanent population was nearly 400,000 (CCMA, 2017), but Geelong alone is expected to exceed this in the coming decades (Commonwealth of Australia, 2018).

The catchment contains four primary basins comprising the Barwon, Moorabool, Lake Corangamite and the Otway Coast, with key rivers—the Barwon and Moorabool—bisecting the catchment east-west and north-south respectively. The headwaters of the Barwon River[4] commence at Barramunga in the central Otway Ranges, meandering north-easterly where it takes in the Leigh River at Inverleigh, and then easterly until it meets the Moorabool River near Fyansford before entering Lake Connewarre and exiting to Bass Strait at Barwon Heads. For reference, Barwon Water's approximate service area takes in about one-half of the Corangamite catchment's total area (see Figure 1).

[3] A catchment is an artificial boundary used to describe a geographic area where water is collected by the natural landscape, draining to a particular point. Run-off in catchments discharge into a waterway such as a creek, river, lake, ocean, drainage or groundwater system.

[4] 'Barwon' from the Wadawurrung word 'Parrwang', meaning 'Magpie'. The 'Magpie' River.

Figure 1. The Corangamite catchment with approximate Barwon Water Service Area and Traditional Owner nations (Victorian Fisheries Authority, 2008, Barwon Water, 2018b).[5]

The Barwon Water service region includes three Traditional Owner nations: Wadawurrung, Gulidjan, and Gadubanud (hereafter collectively referred to as the 'Barwon tribes'). Each nation was originally defined by their own distinct language, living on their country within defined but semi-porous boundaries. Traditionally, the most fundamental social unit within a tribe was a clan. A clan consisted of groups of related males and their wives and children, with typical sizes varying between 40 to 60 people (Lourandos, 1977), with upper estimates more than 120 people (Dawson, 1881). To put this in context, the Wadawurrung, by way of example, at the time of European occupation consisted of 25 clans with an estimated population of between 1,620 to 3,240 people (Clark, 1990).[6] As the Traditional Owners of a defined area ('estate'), clan ownership of the land was inherited at birth by both sexes, with the clan's senior elders administering the land and its resources in a patrilineal kinship arrangement (Richards and Jordan, 1999). Trade,

intermarriage, social relationships, ritual meetings, and disputes with neighbouring tribes were commonplace. Figure 1 shows the approximate boundaries of the three Barwon tribes, overlaid on the Barwon Water service area as well as basins within the Corangamite catchment.

To provide proper perspective on the history of the catchment, it is important to describe the history of the Traditional Owner groups; albeit through a 'western' lens. The earliest archaeological dating of Aboriginal people within the Port Phillip region dates to 31,000 years before present (BP) at Keilor on the Maribyrnong River (Canning et al., 2010). Other sites, within relative geographical proximity, date even earlier than this (Lake Mungo in south-western NSW, 50,000 BP (Bowler et al., 2003); Tasmania, 40,000 BP (Paton, 2010); suggesting that even earlier habitation of Victoria was highly likely. In Australia itself, the earliest archaeological evidence stretches to 65,000 BP (Clarkson et al., 2017) with the possibility that this may extend further back in time (Cane, 2013, Malaspinas et al., 2016).

To use a 'water' timeline analogy relevant to this paper, if the entire 160km length of the Barwon River represented Aboriginal presence in Australia, then European settlement would be the equivalent of the last 500 metres of the river's length. In any event, Australian Aboriginals are the longest surviving continuous culture on the planet. Why is this important? Only by considering these long-time scales and developing an understanding of their deep connection to country can we place historical European settlement, our present endeavours and challenges, as well as our future aspirations in a much broader context.

Climate change offers a case in point. Consider that the Aboriginals themselves experienced significant climate change and were able to adapt and thrive through an ice-age (late-Pleistocene of 30,000 – to 10,000 years ago was colder and drier) to present-day conditions (the 'Holocene', warmer, more humid and wetter) (Lourandos, 1977). While such concepts of deep-time are difficult to grasp, they should nonetheless be championed as instances of indigenous climate adaptation—especially around adjusting to changes of vegetation types, faunal distribution, species numbers, sea-level rise, and altered rainfall patterns—all similar to present-day challenges, albeit occurring across differing time scales.

More broadly, Traditional Owners have managed land and water sustainably for thousands of generations and have lived-cultural experience of climate change. What lessons await to be learned? Lessons in land and water management, in agriculture, in resource management, sustainable carrying capacity, in fire management techniques? For good reason, the Victorian water sector has recognised the importance of strengthening modern understandings, as witnessed by Victoria's strategic water plan, *Water for Victoria*, that seeks to engage Traditional Owners and incorporate their ecological expertise and knowledge into contemporary water practice and planning (DELWP, 2016).

As far as the Barwon tribes were concerned, their traditional lifestyle was one of hunting, fishing and gathering. Movement over country was (and remains, where practicable) dictated by seasons and necessity, as clans in the region shifted their base camp two or three times per year in accordance with the seasonal availability of food and water (Richards and Jordan, 1999). Typically, camps were located near permanent sources of fresh water, with the waterways and wetlands forming a crucial—perhaps defining—role in two important ways. First, fresh sources of water were a necessity for their survival; influencing diet, cropping, habitation patterns, sustenance and movement across country. Corrina Eccles, a Wadawurrung woman has described how the rivers act like a highway to connect their peoples and sustain life:

> Waterways connect us to our stories, it was our cultural way of travel and connection to other tribes. The diverse waters on country and ocean all provide us with food sources and nourish the wellbeing of all life (Corrina Eccles cited in Barwon Water, 2018a).

Walking over Country to connect with neighbouring tribes, Aboriginal people would have witnessed extensive

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[5] All superimposed boundary lines drawn on this map are for indicative purposes only and should not be considered as an authoritative source.

[6] Total Australian Aboriginal population at the point of European occupation vary from lower limit estimates of 500,000 TAYLOR, J. & BIDDLE, N. 2005. An evidence based analysis of indigenous population and diversity. The Journal of Indigenous Policy. to upper estimations peaking at 1.2 million around AD 1500 WILLIAMS, A. N. 2013. A new population curve for prehistoric Australia. Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences, 280.. According to the 2016 Australian Bureau of Statistics census, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander living in the greater Geelong area today is 2,415 ABS. 2016. ABS 2016 Census Community Profile [Online]. Canberra: Commonwealth Government, Australian Bureau of Statistics. Available: http://quickstats.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2016/communityprofile/IARE202006?opendocument [Accessed 3 Jan 2019]..

aquaculture operations that were common amongst Victorian tribes, variously involving the use of weirs, trenching and embankments, drainage techniques, nets and traps, dikes, and channelling (Pascoe, 2017). Large aquaculture systems, covering more than 10 to 15 acres, have been identified at Mt William (near Lancefield) and the Grampians (Frankel and Major, 2017). The Budj Bim aquaculture site (Figure 2) slightly to the west of Corangamite catchment—nominated in 2017 for World Heritage listing—had an extensive engineering operation for eel harvesting and supported a permanent population that lived in dwellings constructed of stone and thatch. Twice the age of the Pyramids of Giza, these dwellings were described by early Europeans as resembling 'a village' (Frankel and Major, 2017). It is possible, indeed highly likely, to envisage that such aquaculture systems and villages would have existed in the Barwon region but, through natural changes to landscape and colonisation, have since disappeared.

Figure 2. The Budj Bim wetlands on Gunditj Mirring country. [Photo courtesy Ben Church Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation].

By any measure, watercourses were (and remain) crucial to patterns of indigenous settlement and of daily life. Ron Arnold, Guligad elder from the Gadubanud nation, has described the importance of the Barwon River to his people:

> Water is sacred to the traditional way of life. Its value is intangible. The Barwon River is a very ancient system. For our people, the wetlands and river have sustained births, deaths, marriages, food, trade, festivals, medicines, totems, shelter … It gives us a spiritual connection to country. Nature, plants, trees, birds, insects, which are all part of the eco-system as we know it to be. It is intangible.

During interviews for this paper, Ron lamented that much of what existed had been destroyed, removed and lost, but highlighted that vivid descriptions can still be found in oral tradition and literature. Writing in 1839, the settler Peter MacPherson depicted that 'midway between Geelong and Ballarat, there is a considerable number of mounds, locally known as Blackfellow's ovens … As cooking was concerned, the necessity for ready access to water explains at once why so many ovens are to be found along the banks of creeks and rivers, as well as by the margins of lagoons and lakes' (MacPherson, 1884). As MacPherson wrote, such ovens were to be found all throughout the Corangamite catchment, some as large as 80 feet in diameter and 5 feet in height at the centre (ibid, 55).

In the diaries of other early colonial settlers, depictions of Aboriginal camps, ceremony and life are also to be found right along the Barwon, Moorabool and Leigh River, at Murgheboluc, Native Hut Creek, Lake Modewarre, Lake Connewarre, Kardinia Creek (Highton) and others (Richards and Jordan, 1999). Wadawurrung elder, Uncle Bryon Powell, has estimated that as much as 80 per cent of Wadawurrung clans lived along the waterways; 'water sustains life … we always gravitated to the waterways' (Powell, 2015).

Just as water was crucial for survival, it also formed—and continues to form—an important spiritual connection to country. Echoing Ron Arnold's comments on the intangible qualities of water, ethno-historians writing in the early twentieth century observed the importance of water to Australian Aborigines more broadly:

> "Every permanent water is part of someone's ancestral estate, or is on someone's *altrjeringa* [dream-time] road". This is indeed an obvious conclusion: the natives camp near waterholes; hence "spirit children" are there conceived, and hence a waterhole must always be somebody's place (Roheim, 1945).

Lloyd Warner in *A Black Civilisation* (1937), wrote:

> The most important unifying concept in the whole of clan ideology is that of the sacred waterhole in which reposes the spiritual unity of clan eternal qualities … water … is one of the most important symbols of spiritual life (Warner quoted in Roheim, 1945).

Spiritual connections to country are also reflected in indigenous lore. Bundjil (eagle), in particular, forms a crucial part of the Kulin nation creation stories (the Wadawurrung being part of the Kulin nation). In this telling, 'water' is central to life:

> Having formed features of the earth Bundjil decided to bring humanity into existence. He gathered up a quantity of clay from a riverbed … shaping them into the image of two men … Then Bundjil's brother Pallian, who had been given control of all the rivers, creeks and billabongs, began to thump the water with his hands. The water became thicker and thicker and eventually took on the shape and appearance of two women (Ellender and Christiansen, 2001).

Notwithstanding, the arrival of Europeans within the Corangamite catchment decimated the traditional life of the Barwon tribes. Initial contact (1802, Lieutenant John Murray at Indented Heads; 1802, Matthew Flinders who climbed Wurdee Youang; and William Buckley (1803 – 1835) an escaped convict from the brief Sorrento settlement) eventually gave way to the arrival of John Batman (1835) and systematic European settlement. Surveyed and gazetted as a town in 1838, Geelong's rapid population growth by squatter-settlers was proportional only to the decimation of the Barwon tribes who, in a familiar pattern of contact, succumbed in large numbers to venereal disease, starvation, oppression, violence, and dispossession, with most eventually concentrated into Christian missions at Buntingdale (1839-1848), and government reserves from 1860 at Mt Duneed, Steiglitz, and Karngun near Winchelsea (Richards and Jordan, 1999). By 1858, Foster Fyans (Geelong's first magistrate)[7], estimated there to be no more than 20 Wadawurrung people remaining in the greater Geelong area, with possibly the last—Mullawallah—passing in 1896 (Richards and Jordan, 1999, Newton, 2016). Doubtless, the Gulidjan and Gadubanud tribes hold similar accounts.

Ironically, water—that had played such an important part in sustaining the Barwon tribes for tens of thousands of years—was also central in their displacement and demise. Writing in 1841, a local station owner remarked: 'The very spots most valuable to the Aborigines for their productiveness— the creeks, water courses, and rivers—are the first to be occupied [by Europeans]' (line 162).

Heather Le Griffon in *Campfires at The Cross*, echoes this point highlighting the obvious injustice that while the best lands were taken, 'no equivalent [was] rendered' (Le Griffon, 2006). Thus, waterways that were at once an existential part of Barwon tribes' life, culture and spirit for thirty-millennia became, *within a generation*, beyond their reach.

The shockwaves of this continue to reverberate today, not only for the people of the Barwon tribes, but also in regards to the environment that has borne major losses of native flora and fauna as well as significant disruption to local waterways; all faced with the prospect of an increasing population in an ever drier climate. On this point, it is worth considering the words of Bill Gammage (2012):

> If we are to survive, let alone feel at home, we must begin to understand our country. If we succeed one day we might become Australian.

[7] Fyans' established Geelong's first permanent fresh water supply in 1840 by creating a 'breakwater' that was built over an ancient Aboriginal crossing point of the Barwon River. The site of the suburb now bears the name 'Breakwater'.

PART II: PROGRESSING COOPERATIVE PARTNERSHIP

Having briefly overviewed the Barwon tribes and some of their connections to country, this section shifts to examining what actions Barwon Water has taken in the sphere of reconciliation.

While *Water for Victoria* crafted a strategic plan for the Victorian water sector to better engage Traditional Owners across a range of areas, many water utilities remain at the beginning of their journey, with the pace, scale and intensity of engagement with Traditional Owners at utility discretion. As a result, knowledge sharing and reconciliation benchmarking—that is, who is doing what, to what extent, and how well—between water utilities can be obscure and not widely communicated. This is magnified at the national level. As a case in point, the peak industry body that leads on many inter-utility issues, the Water Services Association of Australia (WSAA), has identified benchmarking and indigenous engagement activities as an issue requiring further work. In this context, other water utilities, and peak industry bodies, might gain some ideas from this section of the paper that could inform their own journey in this area.

Until the advent of *Water for Victoria*, Barwon Water's approach and engagement with Traditional Owners was a governance-led relationship largely defined by meeting a utilities' legislative compliance and engineering requirements. Typically, this was dominated by the development of a Cultural Heritage Management Plan (CHMP), written when a potential impact of a proposed activity (such a new pipeline, pump-station, or other such water infrastructure) may have infringed on an area of cultural sensitivity. Pointedly, because the CHMP requires local Registered Aboriginal Party (RAP) approval, the relationship between parties could be characterised as transactional.

Kuarka Dorla was the name used for one of Barwon Water's informal meeting areas. Kuarka Dorla is an informal meeting area that is open to the environment. The area includes spotted gum decking and sections of native grasses and shrubs. The layout is modelled from the shapes of rock and sand formations. Kuarka Dorla means fishing place for mullet and was the original name for Anglesea, a coastal hamlet located in Barwon Water's service area. From Uncle Bryon, "Limpets and molluscs were gathered out of the rock pools and reefs here. There are huge shell middens around these areas showing evidence of thousands of years of fishing and hunting. The trees would help tell people when to go fishing. When different plants were flowering, they knew that different fish would be running through the rivers".

Wurdee Youang is a large meeting hub for staff to gather for important events. Wurdee Youang is the name for the "You Yangs", the distinctive granite peaks that rise from the flat volcanic plains between Melbourne and Geelong. It means "big hill in the middle of the plain". Lowan, one of the creation beings, rested here as he travelled across country. Everywhere he rested he turned the stone into granite. Wada Wurrung people went to Wurdee Youang for special celebrations and as part of their initiation journey.

Worrowing Willam. This is a significant space outside of the building, connecting Ryrie Street to the cultural arts precinct to the north, as well as Johnstone Park. The space provides a new public pedestrian link through Geelong. The name embodies the connection of the old creek that now runs beneath Geelong, and the connection that Barwon Water has with the waterways of Geelong. The building now sits on what was the banks of the old creek that ran down through Johnstone Park and into the bay.

Box 1. Wadawurrung Place Names in new Barwon Water HQ.

In 2017, a process of strategic renewal at Barwon Water ('*Strategy 2030*') identified an opportunity for deeper levels of engagement that, at its heart, sought to move beyond the transactional and needs-based approaches of the past, to a more partnership inspired relationship of the future. In developing this approach, Barwon Water has sought to adopt a sufficiently wide perspective that elevates three aspects: celebrating Aboriginal deep-time connections to country (*the past*), adopting meaningful actions that advance the livelihood of modern Aboriginals (*the present*), and developing a strategic mindset that strengthens Barwon Water's connection to country and with Aboriginal people and culture into the future (*the future*).

Firstly, as a significant employer, landholder, and manager of a key natural resource, Barwon Water has a clear responsibility to do its part in helping the region better understand, engage, and celebrate ancient Aboriginal

connections to country. By partnering with Traditional Owners, Barwon Water can become a powerful and trusted advocate from which Aboriginal people can communicate their knowledge, passion and wisdom of their culture, their spirituality, and their intimate connections to the region's flora, fauna, as well as places of significance forged across thirty or more millennia. By tapping into this deep-well of indigenous history, Barwon Water can offer its customers—and wider society at large—a much richer and more fulsome context to the provision of safe drinking water that underpins almost every aspect of social and economic life. It may also provide fresh perspectives of how we as a society 'think' and conceptualise water.

To consider that the Barwon and Moorabool rivers have supported local Traditional Owners for tens of thousands of years should be pause for today's customers to appreciate concepts of 'sustainability' through a fresh lens. One example of how Barwon Water has taken small steps in this area was during the recent refurbishment of its headquarters in the CBD of Geelong. In this example, staff from Barwon Water worked alongside Wadawurrung elders to incorporate aspects of their language, their art, as well as their history and culture in the naming of *all* meeting rooms and spaces within the new building. Through numerous meetings and storytelling sessions, the names were carefully chosen with the aim of creating a meaningful and lasting connection between our new building and country (refer to box 1 for examples).

In addition to this, Barwon Water has engaged Traditional Owners to take all employees for cultural awareness training. Topics covered include Stolen Generation, life as a modern Aboriginal person, and cultural heritage. Importantly, the training also includes a visit to a culturally significant site (led by Wadawurrung elders) where staff can connect with and learn about site history, dreamtime stories, and indigenous foods amongst other activities.

The second reason for developing a partnership-based approach with Traditional Owners, is to provide a present-day practical commitment that enables the region's Aboriginal people to flourish. This response has taken shape in a number of ways. Foremost has been the development of a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP)—approved by Reconciliation Australia as an 'Innovate RAP'—that outlines a series of commitments to help foster social change and economic opportunities for First Nation peoples.

One example has involved generating opportunities to incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander supplier diversity within the organisation; this has included the removal of barriers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses, communicating clearly to internal staff those Aboriginal businesses that are available, investigating 'Supply Nation' membership, and strengthening commercial relationships with local indigenous firms. Economic opportunity has also been extended to the region's indigenous youth. In the 2018/19 trainee intake, for example, more than 60 per cent were Aboriginal and / or Torres Strait Islander, and Barwon Water has recently directly employed an Aboriginal person in the position of Aboriginal Partnerships Advisor.

Lastly, staff at Barwon Water are increasingly considering Traditional Owner perspectives in their everyday work, looking for opportunities where it can be included *de riguer*. With this thinking, Barwon Water education outreach staff have included a Traditional Owner research theme as part of its work with the Victorian "Tech School" initiative where high-school students have the opportunity to research an indigenous water issue and create a 360º video story. This simple initiative alone has the potential to reach—and educate—almost 20,000 high-school students!

The third reason underpinning a partnership approach is to ensure community leadership and the development of a strategic mindset that strengthens Barwon Water's connection to Country and Aboriginal culture into future. Central to this has been leadership 'buy-in' as witnessed by the uptake by Barwon Water's Board and senior executives espousing a commitment to recognise Aboriginal traditions, history, and culture as being a key part of strategy development, business decisions, and community engagement. As noted by Barwon Water's Managing Director, Tracey Slatter:

> … [the Traditional Owners have helped] us to see the land, water and environment around us through the eyes of an Aboriginal person. Their willingness to share knowledge and stories assists us to understand and support their cultures and histories, in turn helping us to Connect with Country … [and] help us incorporate their knowledge and cultures into our business.

As a case in point, all Board reports now have a 'Caring for Country' section, where staff are asked to reflect and take stock of the holistic impact that their particular project, or initiative, may have on Country. In another example, Barwon Water has also changed how it approaches sponsorship with the Geelong Football Club. Having previously supported the club through the Presidents Club Functions at Geelong games, Barwon Water now sponsor the Cats in the Community 'Closing the Gap' program that encourages

cultural connection with the aim of empowering young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from the Barwon region. As part of this, the Wada Nyooroo ('Come to Paint') program was held where more than a dozen young indigenous people signed up to paint the bollards that are now displayed in the new public Indigenous garden at Simonds Stadium. A sampling of the key actions from the Barwon Water Reconciliation Action Plan are at Enclosure 1.

PART III: FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

As part of implementing Barwon Water's *Innovate Reconciliation Action Plan*, Barwon Water is now working with Traditional Owners to explore incorporating aspects of 'Caring for Country' principles and practices into current work practices and service provision through the development of a 'Caring for Country' plan. 'Caring for Country' can be understood generally as Indigenous peoples' approaches to land and water management. At its core, 'Caring for Country' rests on the principle that 'if you look after the country, the country will look after you' (Weir et al., 2011).

Although the description of Caring for Country draws sharp emphasis around the environmental and landscape management dimensions, there are wider benefits to be found in the social-political, cultural, economic, and of the physical and emotional wellbeing of Indigenous people. For Indigenous people, it is increasingly documented that Caring for Country is intricately linked to maintaining cultural life, identity, autonomy and health. These benefits are shared with members of the wider community, who live together with Indigenous people, and facilitate a better community and environment for all Australians.

Barwon Water is at the very start of its journey to understand how the principles and philosophy of 'Caring for Country' can be applied to its current work practices and service provision. Central to developing a 'Caring for Country' plan is a process of engaging with Traditional Owners to explore how concepts of 'Caring for Country' might be applied in a contemporary setting.

Initial discussions with Traditional Owners have highlighted some potential opportunities or initiatives that could be considered more broadly in the future. Whilst much work remains, potential opportunities across the broader water sector may include:

- *Access to Utility Land*. Creating greater opportunities for Traditional Owners to connect to Country through allowing special-use access on utility-owned land. Potential spinoffs include opportunities to educate people how to connect to Country, and a space where the community and tourists can come to learn. Taking this a step further, exclusive access or even land transfer would allow Traditional Owner groups to create a deeper connection to Country through traditional land management practices, repatriation of ancestral remains and a spiritual place of their own.
- *Cultural corridors*. Access to land could potentially be extended to include the region's waterways as cultural zones. Activities within these areas could include a return to aquaculture and historical agricultural practices, noting that Water for Victoria has a stated aim of increasing Aboriginal access to water for economic development. This in turn could lead to education and tourism opportunities, selling produce from aquaculture or irrigated farming (potentially also from recycled water) to supply burgeoning indigenous food products market.
- *Traditional practices in Higher Education*. A return of aquaculture and indigenous agricultural practices in utility-operated or managed areas could represent an opportunity for University, High-School or Gordon TAFE students, as well as Community groups to learn from Traditional Owners. This could involve students spending time to understand how to identify and source seedlings, plant crops, identify edible bush tucker, find sources of water, use indigenous seasonal calendars, and so on. This could be readily packaged-up as various 'modules' and then incorporated into University courses, such as those run by Deakin University's Institute of Koori Education or other Agriculture and Environmental studies. Over time, students would learn first-hand sustainability practices of how Traditional Owners worked the land for millennia. Benefits include greater understanding of our history and could inform broader land and water management practices across the state; informing and teaching future generations of land and water managers.
- *Aboriginal employment*. Greater employment opportunities for Aboriginal people within the water sector. In order to achieve the industry's objectives, an increase in Aboriginal employment must occur. Not only could this create a positive social outcome for Aboriginal people, it shows a genuine commitment to the incorporation of Aboriginal culture, history and traditions into the way manage our water resources and conduct our broader business. The Victorian public sector currently has an Aboriginal

employment target of 2% for the Victorian public service. Other companies within the water industry have developed Aboriginal employment targets similar to the Victorian public service. Given the strong connection between water, land management and Aboriginal people, should the water industry be adopting a more ambitious target (is 5% possible and reasonable)? This concept could be extended by having exclusive Board positions reserved for Aboriginal leaders; providing insights and strategic leadership at the very highest levels of many government agencies and industry groups.

- *Staff Education*. Water utilities should consider innovative ways to continually educate their workforce about Caring for Country, cultural practices, the intrinsic value of water, and deeper knowledge of local water catchments from Traditional Owners perspectives. Understanding, knowledge and staff connection to Country are all important first steps to changing business processes.
- Water utilities should consider with fresh purpose to re-name their assets and facilities after local indigenous names. So much of Aboriginal cultures, histories and languages have been lost. This idea provides organisations with a great way to commence their journey into learning about the longest living culture on earth. It will also provide a great pathway into developing new meaningful partnerships with the Traditional Owners that in turn will help to achieve their strategic objectives.
- *Funding models*. Are there new or innovative funding models that can be applied by water corporations to facilitate the implementation of cultural heritage projects?

CONCLUSION

This paper has sketched the importance of regional waterways in the lives of the Traditional Owners of the Barwon tribes, the Wadawurrung, Gulidjan, and Gadubanud. From their perspective, water has a sacred quality which imbibes every aspect of their being: births, deaths, ritual, spirit, custom, sustenance, festivals, trade and more. In the words of Ron Arnold from Guligad clan, it has an 'intangible' value.

Barwon Water has sought to develop a closer connection and deeper understanding with the region's Traditional Owners. The developing partnerships between Barwon Water and Traditional Owners in its service region is helping us incorporate history, traditions, and culture into where we work, how we operate and how we plan. Given the lack of historical engagement with our Traditional Owners—not only from the water industry but more broadly across society—there remains a lot of ground to cover. With this in mind, the ideas and actions discussed within this paper should be used as a spring-board to consider not just all that has come before, but what is possible for a better future.

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Barwon Water: Reconciliation Action Plan[1]

Ser	Action	Outcomes
1	Raise internal and external awareness of our RAP to promote reconciliation across our business and sector.	Executive Leadership Team and Board to provide leadership to Barwon Water on Cultural Heritage/Aboriginal Values by contributing to the implementation of the RAP.
2	Investigate opportunities to improve and increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment outcomes within our workplace.	Review P&C and recruitment procedures and policies to ensure there are no barriers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees and future applicants participating in our workplace.
3	Engage employees in continuous cultural learning opportunities to increase understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, histories and achievements.	Develop and implement an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural awareness training strategy for our staff, which defines cultural learning needs of employees in all areas of our business and considers various ways cultural learning can be provided (online, face to face workshops or cultural immersion).
4	Develop and maintain mutually beneficial relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities and organisations to support positive outcomes.	Meet with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations to develop guiding principles for future engagement.
5	Engage employees in understanding the significance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural protocols, such as Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country, to ensure there is a shared meaning	Develop, implement and communicate a cultural protocol document for Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country.

Notes:

1. There are many actions that come from the Reconciliation Action Plan with key focus on Relationships, Respect, Opportunity and Progression. Listed are actions and outcomes that play an integral part in Barwon Water current and future business.

THE AUTHORS

Michael Thomas

Michael is the Business Development and Research Coordinator at Barwon Water. He holds an active and ongoing interest in learning and appreciating Traditional Owner connections to country, informed by having spent time living, travelling and experiencing Australia's remote northern landscapes and cultures during his previous 20-year career with a Federal Government department.

David McKinnis

David is an Environmental Co-ordinator at Barwon Water. He is helping Barwon Water to respect the knowledge and Connection to Country that Traditional Custodians of the land have developed over thousands of years, and incorporate these values into their business. In 2018 David led the development and launch of Barwon Water's first Reconciliation Action Plan. David spends all his spare time in the outdoors, fishing, camping, hiking and appreciating the country we live in. Through his role at Barwon Water, David is helping to achieve their vision for reconciliation for all people to stand unified in an inclusive and connected community.

Shu Brown

Shu is the Aboriginal Partnerships Advisor and a proud Adnyamathanha Yura, meaning "People of the Rock" of the Flinders Rangers. His main role within Barwon Water is to work with the local Aboriginal communities and Traditional Owners to identify economic opportunities, maintain healthy relationships and help develop strategic projects and partnerships. He has a passion for working with the Traditional Owners of the Land, striving to achieve the best outcomes for them and the business. Shu's spare time consists of fishing, camping and spending time with his wife and children, acknowledging that his children will be the future leaders of his community.