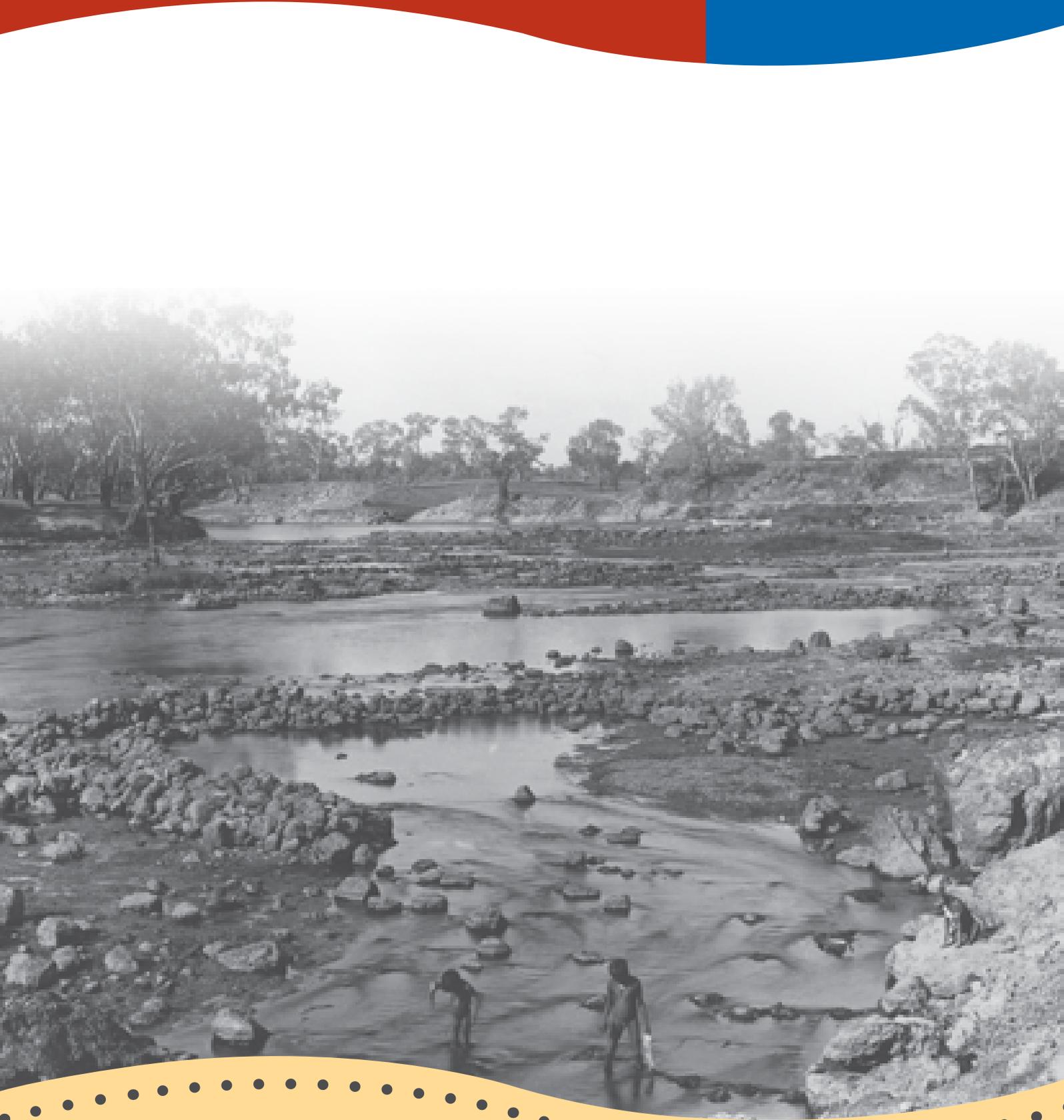


The Barwon-Darling River
An Historic Waterway



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Aboriginal heritage

Aboriginal people depended on the River for their water and food as well as having a deep spiritual connection to the River.

For the Aboriginal people in this part of the country, the Barwon-Darling River was the centre of their existence and they lived with its changing channels for over 40,000 years.

*On the Darling proper, the people took their name from the river. It was the Paaka and they were, and still are, the Paakantyi.**

Paakantyi lands extended along the river from the Murray-Darling Junction to approximately where Bourke now stands.

To the east there existed three major language groups: the Ngiyampaa on the Barwon, the Murawari on the Culgoa and further north; and the Kamilaraay, whose land covered a vast area of the black soil plains built up by the Namoi, Gwydir and upper Barwon. Distinct tribal groups speaking dialects of these major languages lived along specific sections of the Darling and its tributaries.

The Paaruntiyi people lived on the Paroo and the Naualko and Kurnu lived along the upper Darling. The Weilwan and Kawambarai lived along the Macquarie and Castlereagh. 'The Darling' produced by the Murray Darling Basin Commission, Canberra 2004.

* Different spellings of Aboriginal words reflects the fact that the consonants 'p' and 'b'; 'k' and 'g'; and 't' and 'd' are not distinguished in most Aboriginal languages. In general, the Western CMA uses the predominant spelling as identified by the Western Catchment Aboriginal Reference Advisory Group.

Early explorers

George Evans was the first known European to visit the rivers and plains of the Darling Basin when he explored the upper reaches of the Macquarie Valley in 1813. It was another 15 years before Charles Sturt arrived on the banks of the Darling River in 1829, not far from where Bourke now stands.

"Our difficulties seemed to be at an end, for here was a river that promised to reward all our exertions, and which appeared every moment to increase in importance to our imagination."

Charles Sturt on reaching the Darling River, 1 February 1829.

Natural underground flows of salty water enter the Darling at several points including the one where Sturt attempted to water his horses. He found it too salty and originally named the Darling 'Salt River'.

In 1832 Major Thomas Mitchell encountered the Barwon River.

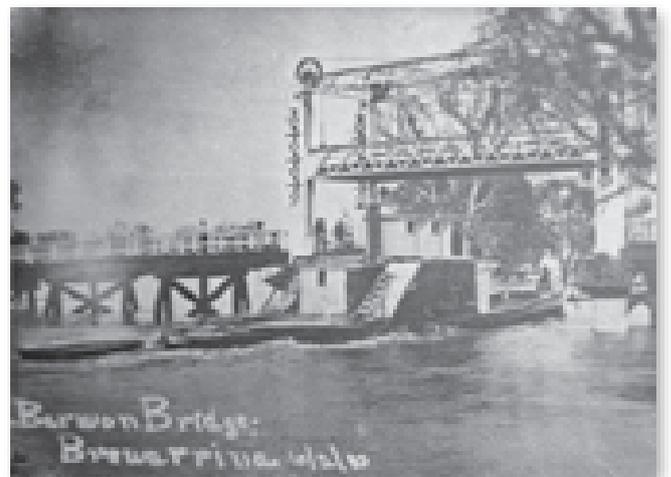
"At eight miles, our course was intercepted by a deep and rapid river, the largest that we had yet seen. I had approached within a few yards of the brink; and I was not aware of its being near, until I saw the opposite water-worn shore, and the living waters hurrying along westward."

Major Thomas Mitchell on the Barwon River downstream of Mungundi, 23 January 1832.

It took some years to chart the course of the Darling. While expeditions led by Mitchell in 1832 and 1836 covered much of the river, the lower reaches were not explored until 1843 when Edward Eyre became the first white man to reach Laidley's Ponds (now Menindee Lakes). In 1846 Mitchell set out on his final expedition into the Darling Basin, exploring the northern reaches of the Basin.

European settlement

The explorers paved the way for European settlement along the Barwon-Darling River. Farmers and pastoralists were the first to venture out along the river, then increasing river trade saw the establishment of a number of towns, including Walgett, Brewarrina, Bourke, Louth, Tilpa and Wilcannia.



Paddle steamer Jupiter at the Barwon Bridge, Brewarrina 1910. Photo: State Library of South Australia, SLA: B 19485.

The first European settlers in Brewarrina arrived in the early 1840s. By the 1860s the town was a river port for the transportation of local wool and supplies. The bridge on the Barwon was built in 1889. The bridge could be raised and lowered for the river boats to pass underneath.

A post office was gazetted for "Wallgett on the Barwin River" in 1851 and the town sites were surveyed in 1859. The district would have been occupied prior to this by the local Aboriginal people, the Kamilaroi, squatters and their livestock. The town of Walgett was proclaimed on 20 March 1885.



Charlie Matthew's coach at Louth. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.

Louth was established in 1859 when T.A. Matthews built a pub to cash in on the booming river trade as goods and workers travelled the Darling River in paddle steamers. Louth was also a stopover for Cobb & Co Coaches. Matthews' son, Charlie, was a driver for Cobb & Co.

"A place that loved a drink, a party and a punt" – Henry Lawson, writing about Louth.



Rowing on the Darling River in front of paddle steamer, Louth, NSW 1890. Photo: Government Printing Office Collection, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.

Established in 1866, Wilcannia was once known as the "Queen City of the West". It was Australia's second largest inland port (behind Echuca) during the boom years of the 1880s. During that time, sandstone was quarried locally for the beautiful buildings that stand today as a reminder of those heady days.



Wilcannia Rowing Club on the Darling during the flood of 1886. Photo: Charles Bayliss, 1850 - 1897, National Library of Australia.



Wilcannia Centre Lift Bridge (built in 1896) and a paddle steamer, 1935. Photo: National Library of Australia.

Tilpa became an important port in the 1880s with paddle steamers unloading goods for the sheep stations and loading wool bales for the return journey. Like many other places on the Darling River, getting across the river at Tilpa was difficult. A hand-wound punt was operated until 1952 when a motor was installed. The current bridge was built in 1963. In the late 1890s Bourke was a major inland port for

wool. At its peak, the Bourke Wharf had three steam driven cranes handling 40,000 bales of wool a year. This was shipped down the Darling to ports in South Australia and Victoria, and then sent by rail to Adelaide and Melbourne for local textiles and export.

"If you know Bourke, you know Australia" – Henry Lawson.



Described as the Gate to the 'Never Never': the Bridge at North Bourke. Photo: Bicentennial Copying Project, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.

On the sheep's back

Australia's already rich wool industry was revolutionised in 1888 when Dunlop Station, downstream of Louth, became the first sheep station in the world to introduce mechanical shears. In 1888 the Dunlop woolshed was equipped with 40 mechanical stands and was the first to machine shear an entire flock of sheep. In its heyday approximately 400,000 sheep a year were shorn at Dunlop which had its own paddle steamer wharf for shipping wool bales.



People gathered at the Dunlop Station homestead 1886. Photo: Charles Bayliss 1850 - 1897 National Library of Australia.

The first paddle steamer on the Darling River was 'The Gemini' in 1859 skippered by William Randell.

By the 1890s about 40,000 bales of wool were shipped down the Darling River each year and approximately 100 paddle steamers and barges worked the river. A paddle-steamer towing a barge could carry up to 2,000 bales of wool. An equivalent load today would require twenty semi-trailers.

Low water periods in the river posed problems for paddle steamers. Some boats became stranded, as happened to the 'Jane Eliza' which was stranded between Louth and Tilpa for two and a half years. It holds the records for the longest and shortest journey between Wentworth and Bourke. It took three years to travel from Wentworth to Bourke, yet once the drought broke it took only three weeks to return!



The paddle steamers Excelsior and Barwon picking up wool bales from Balcatherine Station (approx 25km downstream of Wilcannia) on the Darling River. Photo: Museum Victoria.

Paddle steamers relied on timber gathering along the Darling River for fuel which depleted riverside areas of trees and fallen logs, reducing wildlife habitat. Snags (dead trees) were removed and rock bars were blasted where they interfered with river navigation. Snags provide valuable fish habitat and the rock bars often ponded residual pools that were essential to the local Aboriginal people and provided drought refuge for fish and other wildlife.

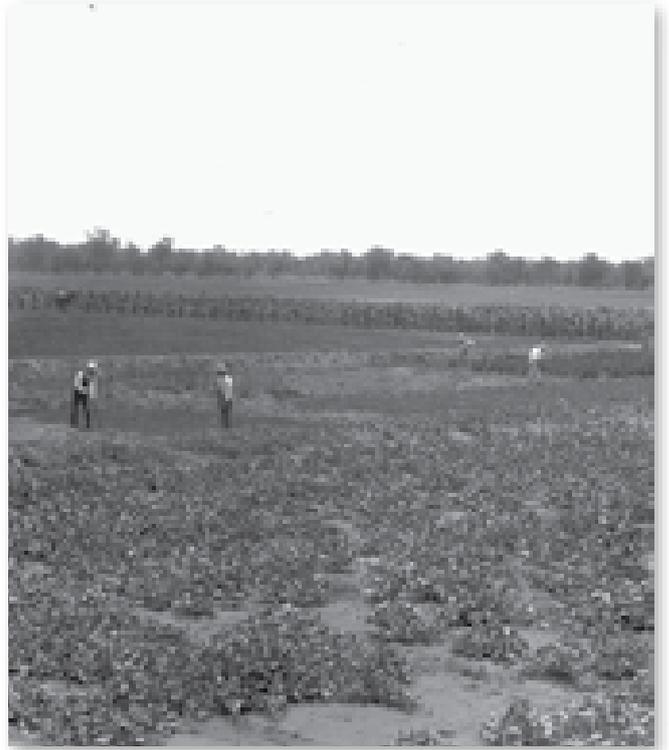


Chopping wood for the paddle steamer Jandra c.1908-9. Photo: Charles Bean, Australian War Memorial, negative number PO2751.011.

Agriculture

Following the advent of irrigation on farms in the 1880s, cotton, citrus fruits and wheat were also shipped by paddle steamers.

In 1896 the Government started an experimental farm at Pera Bore, just north of Bourke, growing everything from stone fruits to cotton. Citrus from Pera Bore was reportedly requested by Queen Victoria. Citrus plantings feature in the current irrigated landscape along with cotton, wheat, melons, grapes and jojoba.



Pera Bore is arguably Australia's first irrigation area established on bore water. The water quality proved unsuitable for long-term irrigation.

These industries form a significant contributor to the local economy. However as the Darling is an unregulated river (without a headwaters dam to regulate flow), water supply is far from guaranteed.



Paddle steamers Emma and Rita unloading chaff on the Darling River, Bourke, NSW 1910. Photo: Bicentennial Copying Project, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.

River trade declined as road and rail links improved throughout Western NSW.

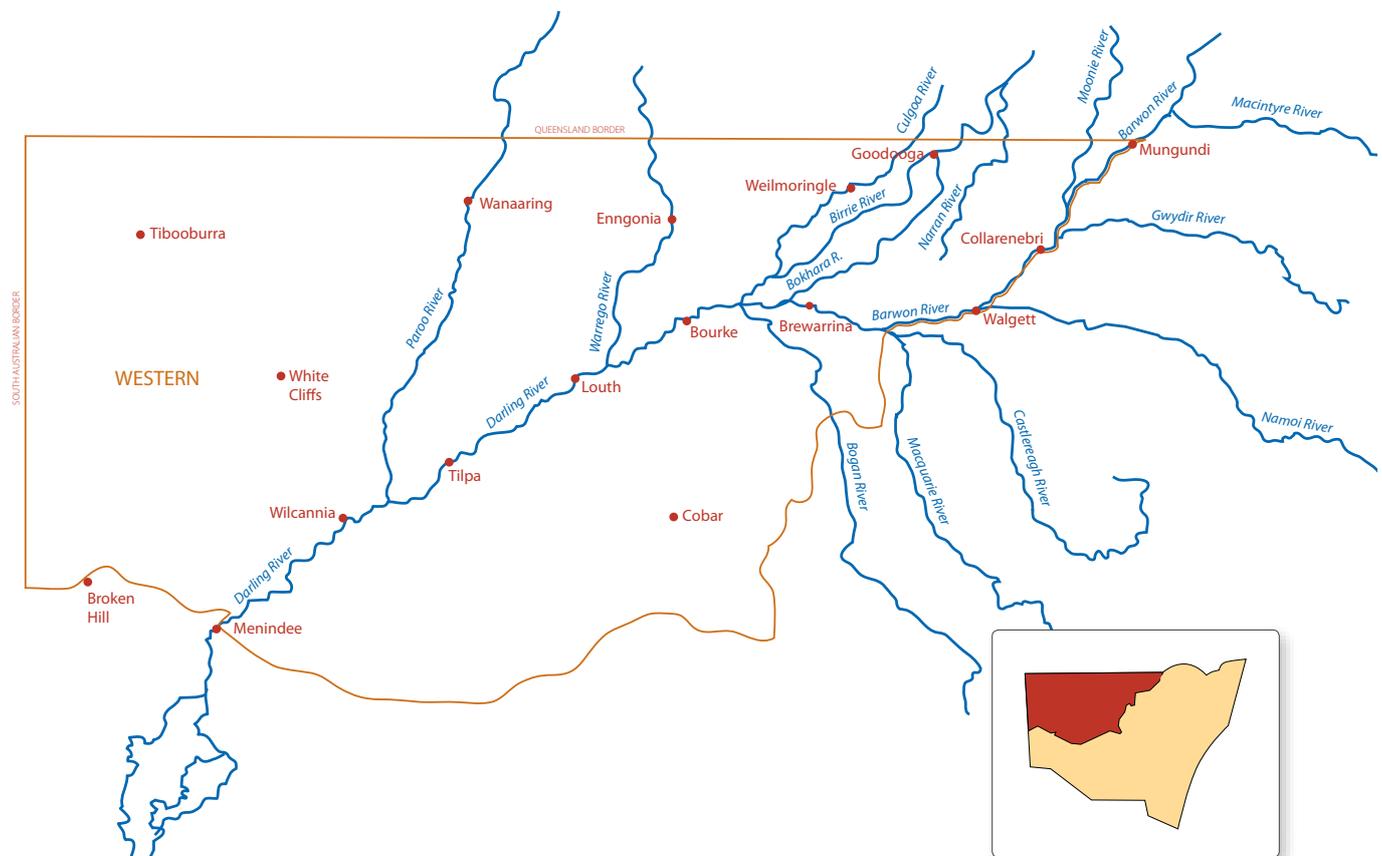
The Western Catchment river systems

Like many rivers within the Western Catchment, the Barwon-Darling River system originates outside the Catchment boundary.

The River is part of a complex system with highly variable flows. Droughts may be followed by heavy rains which fill thousands of small creeks, flooding the wetlands and lakes, flowing across the floodplains, creating new watercourses and reaching widely dispersed billabongs and waterholes.

Water supports and attracts life. It provides habitat for plant and animal biodiversity and supports commerce through industry, irrigation and domestic use.

The Western Catchment Management Authority, together with local government and the Australian Government, is working with the community to better manage natural resources: land and vegetation, rivers and groundwater, cultural heritage and biodiversity.



References and further information

Celebrating 100 Years of Natural Resource Progress in the Western Division of NSW: Learning from the past and planning for the future. Barnes, M and Wise, G. Department of Sustainable Natural Resources and WEST 2000 Plus, 2003

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Through the Western Catchment Management Authority 2009

Disclaimer: The information contained in this publication is based on knowledge and understanding at the time of writing (November 2009). However, because of advances in knowledge, users are reminded of the need to ensure that information upon which they rely is up-to-date and to check currency of the information with the appropriate officer of the Western Catchment Management Authority or the user's independent advisor.

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