

The Barwon-Darling River

Aboriginal life along the River



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



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Daily life

The Aboriginal people depended on the River's resources: abundant fish, crustaceans, mussels and waterbirds. They often made their campsites on the beaches and banks of river channels and lakes.

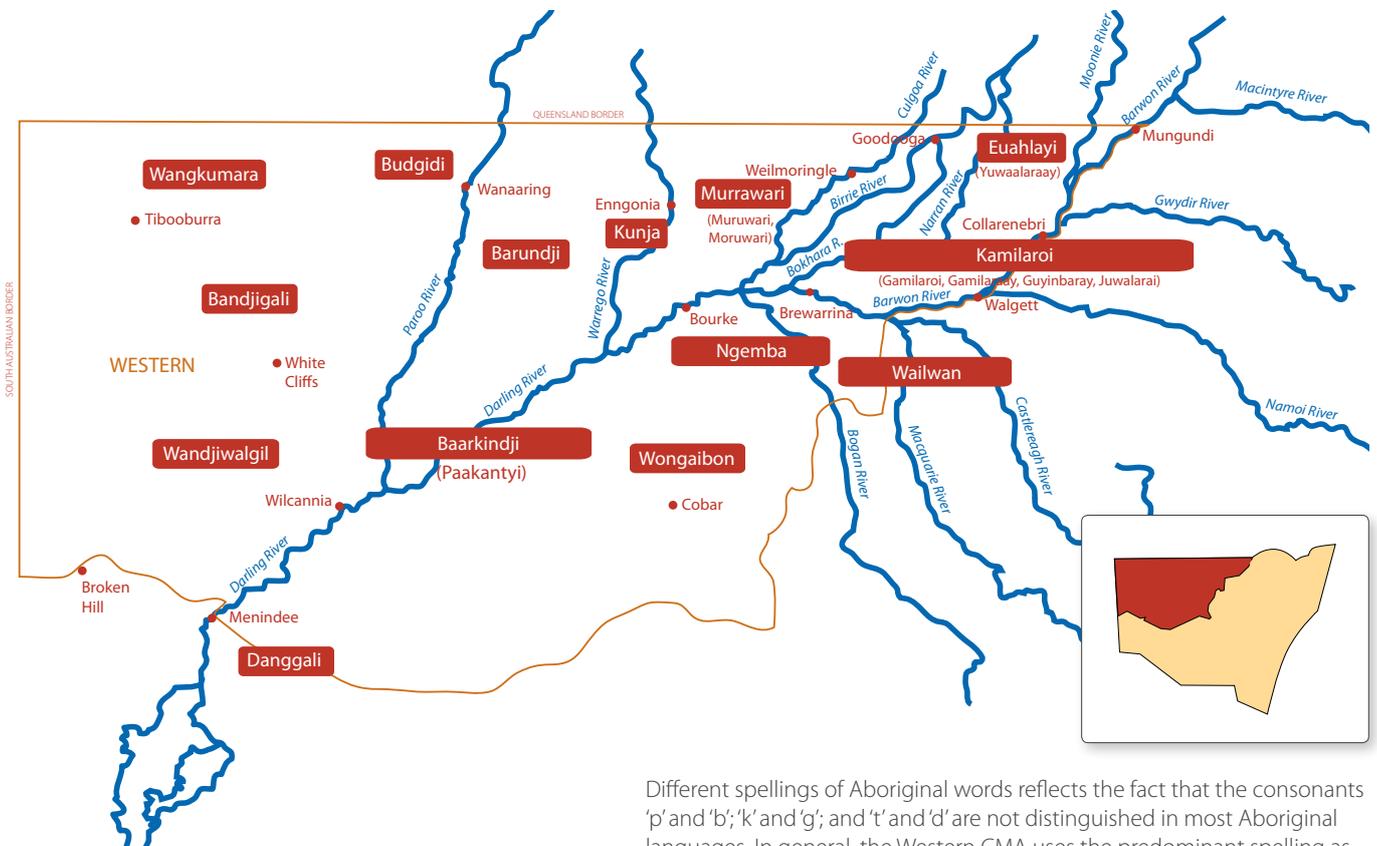
As a result, there is a high concentration of ancient campsites along the River, sometimes buried and preserved by drifting sands. Many have middens (an accumulation of shell refuse left by Aboriginal people) that have great cultural and historical significance. Such sites may also contain fireplace heat retainers made of clay or termite nests, stone artefacts and food remains: mussel shells, yabbie claws, emu and waterbird eggshells and the bones of frogs, fish, birds and mammals. There are also scar trees, usually river red gums, that have had sections of bark removed to make canoes or coolamons.



Grinding stones can be found near the remains of ancient campfires. Aboriginal people used rounded rocks to grind plants such as Nardoo into flour. It is illegal to disturb artefacts.

Aboriginal Language Groups

Current Aboriginal Language Groups as identified by the Western Catchment Aboriginal Reference Advisory Group



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.

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.

Spiritual connection

Aboriginal people continue to have a strong spiritual connection with the river. Its formation is the basis of many creation stories. Coolerbaroo, the culture hero of the Naualko, created the river by emptying his skin waterbag into the long winding channel left when Dayeery pulled a tree root from the ground.

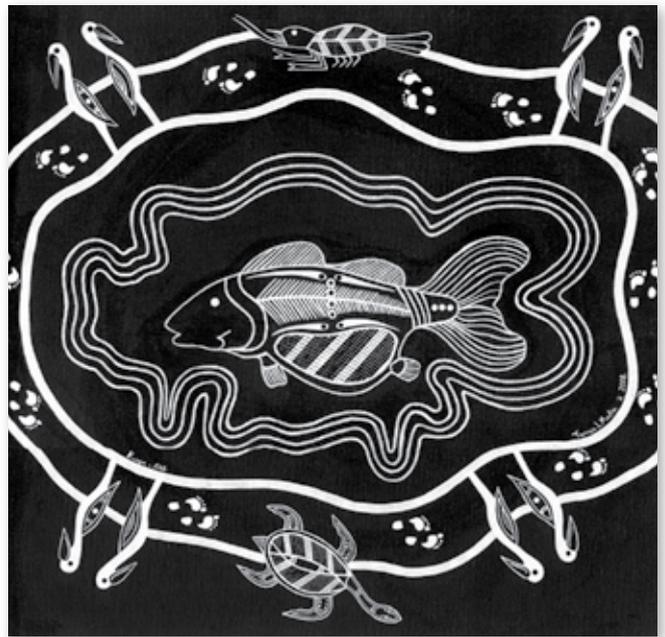


The Wilcannia Fish known as Parntu, which means fish in the local Baarkindji language, was painted in 1992 by Karen Riley as part of a community project. The fish is a significant creature in the life of the Baarkindji people. Parntu provided the community with a ready source of food and contributed to the social fabric of the community prior to white settlement.

Another of the many Darling River stories remembered by Baarkindji people is "The Story of the Falling Star" (1989), related by Elsie Jones of Wilcannia. North of

Wilcannia is a bend called Purli Ngaangkalitji, meaning 'falling star' in the local language. On the riverbed there is a circle of rocks only visible when the river is very low or when it dries up.

According to the Baarkindji people, Malkarra, a miikika or 'doctor' warned the tribe camping on the river that something dangerous was going to happen. That night a ball of fire streaked down. The big black goanna, Ngaarnuru, is the spirit of those killed when the Purli fell, while Parna, the goanna with the wide stripes is the spirit of those who were burnt.



"Kuya" by Tanya Martin (2008). Kuya means fish in Ngiyampaa (Ngemba) language.

Tanya Martin, who created the Kuya image explains: *This picture depicts the importance of man to walk in harmony with mother earth. If we care for her in the 'right way' she will care for our children. The thick lines represent the banks of the Darling River, while thin lines around the yellowbelly represent the Brewarrina fish traps as painted on Mt Gundabooka rock art site, Bourke. The yellowbelly is shown with a large belly of eggs. Footprints represent the traditional custodians walking on their country. Pelicans represent the abundance of fish within the Darling River. Fish, turtle and shrimp represent traditional food sources from the Darling River. I am an Aboriginal woman from the Bourke area. I belong to the Ngemba people and have strong personal and spiritual links with my culture (Kurulkiyalia – stone country people).*

Ngunnhu – Stone Fisheries

Although Brewarrina is located on Ngemba traditional land, it was an intertribal meeting place where neighbouring clan groups met and feasted on fish together.



Aboriginal fishing on the Darling River 1929. Photo: National Archives of Australia: A1, 1929/1896.

This area of the Barwon River is famous for the Ngunnhu (fisheries), one of Australia’s earliest fish traps.

The Ngunnhu are cleverly designed stone walls forming a series of weirs and ponds. They follow the contours of the river bed to direct fish swimming upstream into the ponds which could be closed off. The Aboriginal people speared enough fish for food and then opened them again.

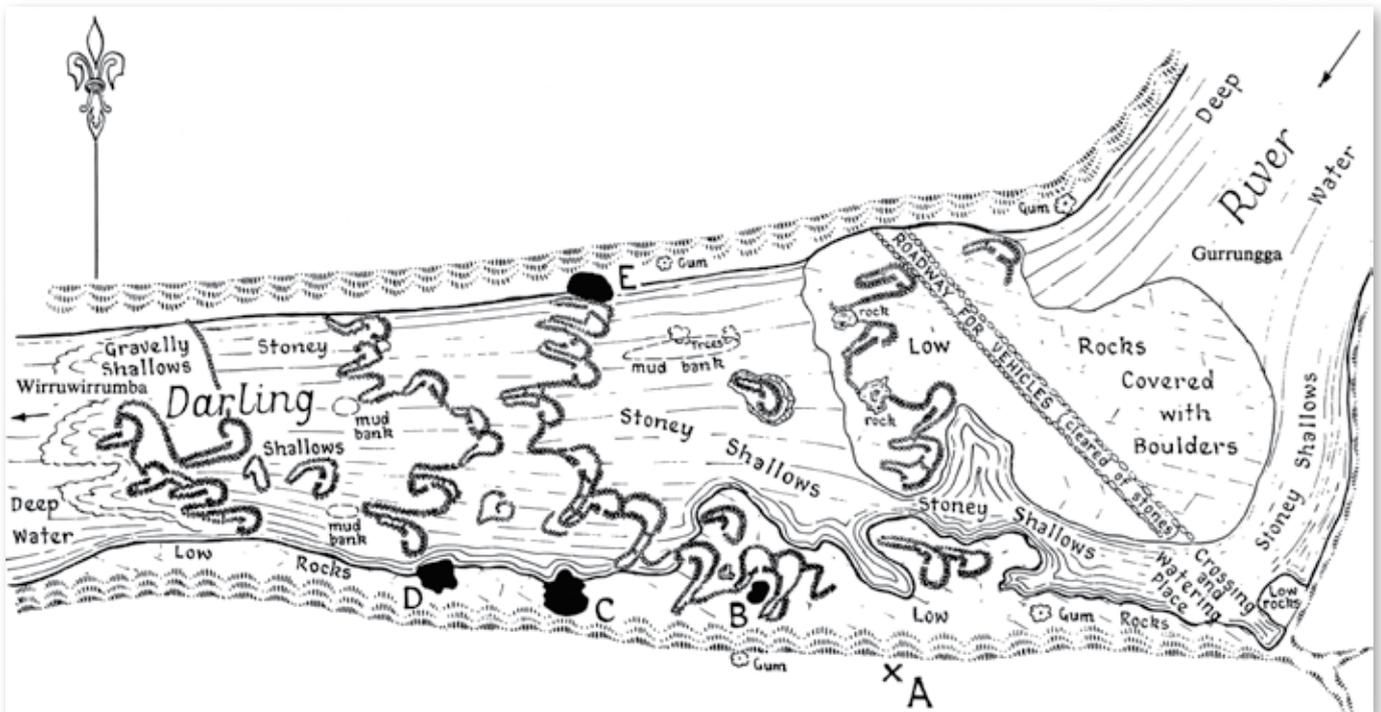
The Ngunnhu were originally much longer and were like a stone net across the Barwon River. Some of the walls were made higher than others so they could be used during low and high water flows. Estimated to be at least 40,000 years old, they are one of the oldest man-made structures in the world.

“They (local Indigenous people) threw a dam of rocks across the river – near Brewarrina, we think – to make a fish trap. It’s there yet. But God only knows where they got the stones from, or how they carried them, for there isn’t a pebble within forty miles.”

Henry Lawson, ‘Over the sliprails,’ ‘The Darling River’, 1900.

Preserving a rich heritage

The protection, preservation, maintenance and acknowledgement of Aboriginal identity, culture and heritage is vitally important to the Aboriginal people of the Western Catchment.

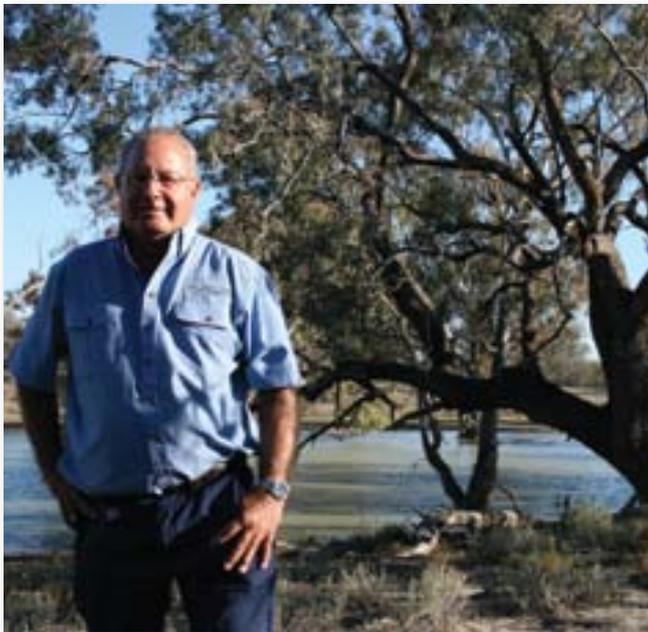


Plan of the fisheries at Brewarrina 15 June 1906.



Members of the Western Catchment Aboriginal Reference Advisory Group.

Working as groups and individuals they have formed numerous partnerships and signed off on memorandums of understanding with local, State and Australian Governments and their agencies in caring for the Catchment. These agreements aim to ensure a joint approach to the preservation of Aboriginal heritage in the Western Catchment of NSW.



Western CMA's Blackie Gordon at the Old Brewarrina Mission Wetland.

The Western CMA employs Aboriginal Community Support Officers who maintain strong relationships with the Aboriginal communities of the Western

Community. They assist local Aboriginal people to take advantage of the training and funding opportunities available to improve their local environment.

Some of the many initiatives undertaken include:

- Formation of the Aboriginal Reference Advisory Group to formally coordinate the input of Aboriginal communities into natural resource management planning activities in the Western Catchment. They are working towards the completion of the Knowledge Capture Project to collect, store and make available traditional ecological knowledge from the language groups of the Western Catchment.
- Restoration of the Old Brewarrina Mission Wetland by the Ngemba Billabong Restoration and Landcare Group. As well as being an important wetland, this is an area of cultural significance with evidence of multiple living sites, hearth sites and scar trees.
- A three-day canoe trip along the Barwon-Darling for school students, providing the opportunity to learn not only about the environment but also the Aboriginal history of the area. The students were from Brewarrina, Bourke and Goodooga.
- Revegetation works along the Darling River by members of the Kurnu-Baarkindji Landcare and Cultural Management Group as part of the Brewarrina to Bourke Demonstration Reach project. Now with specialist revegetation skills, the Group has been engaged by the NSW Department of Primary Industries to undertake more work along the River.



Ethan Johnson of Brewarrina takes part in the educational canoe trip.

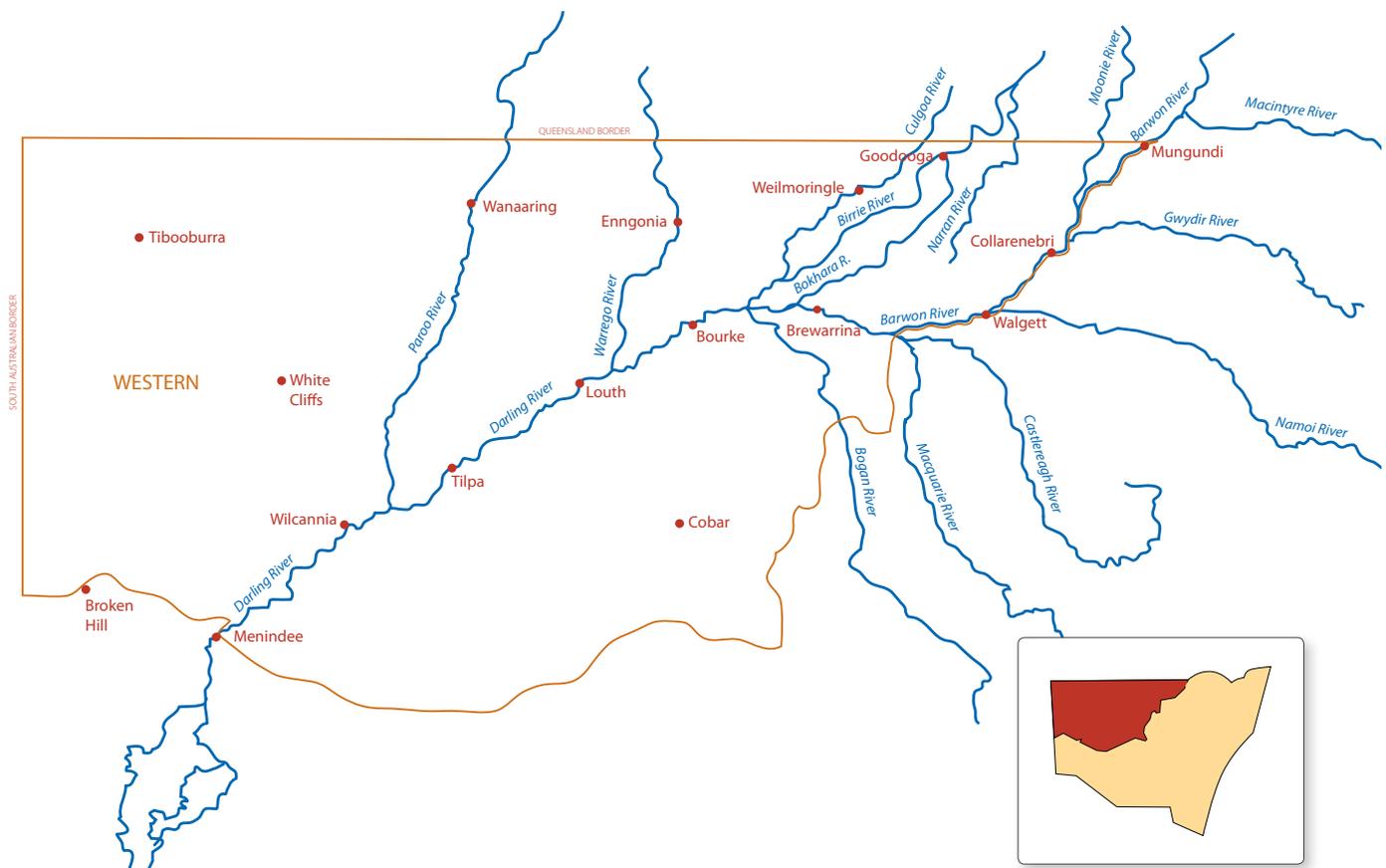
The Western Catchment river systems

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

Mutawintji: Aboriginal cultural association with Mutawintji National Park by Beckett, Hercus, Martin, Colyer ed. 2008.

Breckwoldt, R., Boden, R. and Andrew, J. (eds). 2004. The Darling. Murray-Darling Basin Commission, Canberra.

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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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