

# Cultural Flows in Murray River Country

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We need to be open to an ecological dialogue to facilitate the flow of ideas and the creation of new knowledge for understanding our relationships with the rivers and our responses to river destruction—otherwise the moderns will continue to deplete, destroy and then depart elsewhere (a powerful phrase used by Grinde & Johansen) to begin their destructive cycle again. Indeed, the federal government has dedicated \$20 million to a task force assessing the Northern Territory’s tropical rivers for large-scale agricultural expansion, partly in response to the devastation of agricultural land in the Murray–Darling Basin. Up north, the alarmed traditional owners are saying ‘We don’t want another Murray’ (John Daly quoted in Hancock). The task force has been created to avoid the mistakes of the Murray by investing in scientific expertise and a range of community consultation. However, it depends on what the ‘mistakes’ are perceived to be.

## Cultural flows as a force of life

The traditional owners speak about cultural flows as a way to return fresh water to the parched river ecologies. This water is described as rejuvenating life-sustaining connectivities. Yorta Yorta man Lee Joachim says that cultural flows will be different for each Indigenous nation and for individuals as well. Instead of just one understanding, the meaning of the cultural flow is particular to country and the people of that country. For Lee cultural flows are:

a full flood that maintains all of the area, and is not just limited to a roadside or to a levy bank. It is actually flowing right throughout the system and ensuring that life is continuing within the system that it is supposed to nurture. [25 June 2004]

This flow would threaten homes, infrastructure, human lives, and livestock: ways of living designed around the containment of river water. But Lee has a counter-apocalyptic vision of the flood: the revitalisation of life. Lee positions the life brought by the river as more fundamental than all the other lives that are sustained in the river country, because Lee regards the river as central to

ensuring the continuance of all that other life. Lee identifies the importance of what the river is doing. By attributing this agency to the river, Lee is arguing for the cessation of the 'management' of current natural resource management. Instead, cultural flows is a management that connects with and supports life and that sustains one's own life through connectivity. Indeed, Lee sees that the river is so resilient it can heal itself. The river can adapt to all the violence that has happened, and respond with new energy to continue to live and support life.

Lee has shown us how the language of connectivity is the language of cultural flows. All life is connected and other beings have agency. Humans are not dominating a separate and inferior nature. As Henry Atkinson has also said: 'Cultural flows are a natural flow which allows everything to grow. Cultural flows include your history and your culture' (Wagga Wagga, MLDRIN joint meeting with the CAC, 13 July 2005).

Henry brings our attention to how history and culture are also rehydrated with cultural flows. In connectivity, country, life, culture and history are all intertwined. Again, Henry reveals to us how the arguments of the traditional owners pivot in connectivity. For Henry and Lee, their vision of cultural flows is about returning water in a variable way that supports the immense wetlands and river red gum forests of their Yorta Yorta heartland.

Out on the plains in western New South Wales, Mary Pappin spoke about her desire for the return of the floods that used to come and go: 'whether it just be the mouth of a little creek that floods up every now and then, traditionally that is where the resource would be growing after the flowing down into that area' [22 July 2004].

Mary knows that water is a variable presence. The plants that germinate after the flows come through are part of her inheritance, and she has intergenerational responsibilities to make sure these plants continue to live. Today the plants are absent, but their seeds may be surviving, waiting in the soil to germinate with the next floodwaters. Mary's intimate knowledge of that presence, and her motivation to argue for those plants, is what she offers to cultural flows.

In central New South Wales, Wiradjuri Elder Tony Peachey grew up near the Macquarie River. Peachey says that the Macquarie used to have a good flow going at certain times of the year. However, since the dams, the weirs, the reservoirs, the pumps and the pipes, this flow has 'gradually dissipated': 'So unless you get that freshwater in to flush it out, the river itself just gets sick. That's as simple as it is; because the flows aren't there' [29 October 2004].

For Peachey, cultural flows are a flush of freshwater that enable the river to restore its own health, arresting the build up of weeds and the blue-green algae

that multiply in still, nutrient-polluted water (Wagga Wagga, MLDRIN joint meeting with CAC, 13 July 2005). From his experience, Peachey knows that freshwater and river health go hand in hand.

Further south in the Coorong, the Ngarrindjeri people are distressed about salt levels in the water. With reduced freshwater flows from upstream, the shallow water in the Coorong has become saltier than seawater. This rupture of connectivity has diminished the life that previously thrived in the mixture of fresh and saltwater. Here, the Ngarrindjeri women can no longer find freshwater reeds and must head over to the Murray and the lakes next to the Murray to get the right reeds for basket weaving (Corowa). Again, in this context, cultural flows are talked about as a return of the now-absent fresh water that sustained life. As Ngarrindjeri Elder Matt Rigney has said, ‘Cultural flows—it’s about the regeneration of life’ (Wagga Wagga, MLDRIN joint meeting with CAC, 13 July 2005). Matt is interested in how cultural flows take care of ‘our nurseries’:

What we talk about in terms of our nurseries are our swamps and wetlands. [Other] people see that as waste areas. Those waste areas are not viewed by those who are not in the know or don’t want to be in the know, that they are the future ecosystems for our waterways.

The nurseries are where young lives are nurtured in the richly complex wetlands. Matt argues that the people who do not link freshwater ecologies with the future health of the rivers are either ignorant or are complicit in river destruction. The latter group diverts their attention away from the destruction that surrounds them in order to continue the activities that generate the destruction. Matt identifies the way in which many people regard wetlands as wastelands until they can be physically transformed into a ‘useful’ dam and paddock instead of a ‘useless’ messy swampy bog.

Matt has also talked about cultural flows in relation to taking care of the black swan. Matt is against current water management practices that send water down the river in the middle of summer when the black swans need that water to breed in the winter. This is a personal matter for him, as the black swan is one of his *ngatjis*—a Ngarrindjeri word for a kinship relationship with nature, known as a totem in other literature (see Rose et al. 10; Bell 199). Ngarrindjeri people inherit *ngatjis* from their parents, and they can be any of the local animals and insects. Matt has to care for the swan as a brother or sister. The swan is family. These are ethical relationships of interspecies kinship. Similar totemic systems across Australia, and around the world, provide Indigenous people with an intergenerational foundation for respectful and intimate relationships with nature.

Back upstream in the riverine plains, on the Edwards River anabranch of the Murray, Jeanette Crew talks about cultural flows as a caring agency. Jeanette said that when MLDRIN people speak about cultural flows they are:

probably talking about cultural flows in terms of the availability of traditional foods and maybe looking after special sites, for instance, Bunyip holes, as you know are in the bottom of the river. If there is not enough water there for the Bunyip then perhaps it won't survive. [26 June 2004]

Jeanette links the physicality of the deep pools in the rivers to the survival of the Bunyip. The Bunyip is a mythical creature believed in by both Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people. Such creatures, and all the stories and sites of creative ancestral activity, are relationships that connect country with the Dreaming. In another example from South Australia where high cliffs line the Murray, Ngarrindjeri Elder Agnes Rigney told me how the 'monster type creature' the Mulyewongk lives in caves in the cliffs next to the river (see also Bell 38). The cave is near where the old Swan Reach mission used to be. When the old people went upstream fishing, they would always cross the river to the other side to avoid the cave. I asked Agnes if people still kept away from this spot:

Oh yes ... That spot is still there on the river ... it is beautiful, it is white sand and the grass is just green. It is like a white beach, and the water then used to be clear, green, clear. You could see to the bottom of it back in them days, and it was a most beautiful spot and it was a forbidden one too. [21 July 2004]

The beauty and danger of these places is now covered by a slow flow of muddy regulated water that obliterates life. Ecological destruction destroys not just the plants and animals and their habitat, but the sentience of these places as well. Their ability to inspire fear and beauty is replaced with a bland utilitarian landscape, although the power of the Mulyewongk keeps on and the place is avoided by those in the know. Country continues. Agnes puts the past and the future together at the same time in the same place. She is using the language of continuity with country.

By turning the Murray River into a channel for consumptive water flows, the intricate intimacies of these places have been evened out, and the life of country has been diminished. This utilitarian role of the Murray is now failing the moderns. River destruction is the result of a model of water management based on water as a resource for exploitation; however, for the MLDRIN delegates

cultural flows are not anti-development. Rather, in keeping with their holistic knowledge traditions, cultural flows include economic concerns. As Henry has said:

When we are talking about a cultural flow, we mean the flow of water in the river system is completely natural, going with the season, and that cultural flow belongs to the Indigenous people, so they can get the benefit from the river system whether it is economic or to benefit the environment. In other words for the traditional owners of country to be able to use the water in any way they see fit. It is for looking after country the way the country should be looked after, in a natural way. [7 August 2004]

This is a different way of speaking about the river as an economic resource. A healthy river has economic and environmental benefits, but it is the natural river on which all this depends. There is no denied dependency here: the river country comes first. The rivers' seasons and cycles are to be respected, and in turn economic needs will be provided for as part of the reciprocal relationship.

In all these expressions of cultural flows the traditional owners do not just seek the return of water to country. At stake is their own agency as part of the cultural flow. This is part of their authority to speak and care for country. Thus, this cultural flow is also an expression of the ongoing responsibilities of traditional owners to their country; it is part of their active practice to care for country. Steven Ross has said that cultural flows will be the tangible realisation of the political activity of MLDRIN (pers. comm. 16 February 2006). When realised, they will be part of the political strength of the traditional owners, as the flows will recognise and recharge their identity and authority. A flow of water managed by government denies this meaning. As Wiradjuri Elder Ramsay Freeman asks rhetorically: 'What is the good of having Indigenous people in the country if someone else can come along and tell them what they should be doing in their own country?' [27 June 2004].

In having 'their own' cultural flow, the traditional owners also wish to reduce the fraught and time-consuming exercise of translating what they want to do with the water and why they want to do it.

The traditional owners have developed the language of cultural flows to directly appeal to the importance of connections, countering knowledge that segregates and isolates. It is an evocative term, embedding culture and water together with movement through time and place. Importantly, the flow of water is uneven. Cultural flows recognise variability, and thus they leave and return. This is an ecological restoration approach that is not creating separated reserved lands or

‘spaces for nature’. The territory of water is everywhere and everything. And within this territory the fresh water has its own agency and resilience in river restoration.

## Cultural flows as a modern compromise

The traditional owners interpret cultural flows in the context of modern water management and water scarcity. Indeed, they would not need to make arguments about cultural flows if it was not for the excesses of modern water management. However, the modern water negotiation tables set a number of obstacles for the traditional owners in their translation task. When making arguments about cultural flows into this context, the MLDRIN delegates start speaking in reductionist terms, becoming trapped in modernity’s language and also trapped by their own use of the term ‘cultural’.

The traditional owners have coined the term ‘cultural flows’ to speak to policy-makers accustomed to the terminology of environmental flows. Ecologists have had some successes in arguing for environmental flows to restore river health. Initially environmental flows were envisaged as a one-off release of water from a dam. Today, environmental flows are described in policy as an ongoing responsibility for government to manage water as closely as possible to natural river hydrology (Thoms et al. 353; see also, MDBMC 23). Hydrologists, geomorphologists and ecologists now research how these planned water releases relate to river hydraulics, the speed of the river flow and habitat (Dyer et al. 7; Thoms et al. 365).

In the rhetoric of modern water management, the government draws on the expertise of scientists to determine the best-practice management of the rivers. The traditional owners insert themselves into this space by using the word ‘culture’, and thus make a point about having different concerns that are not encompassed by ‘universal’ science. They assert their distinct Indigenous identity and political status with culture. Further, the delegates direct attention to the influence of culture in their knowledge frameworks; in contrast, this is something that is absent from policy literature on water and natural resource management. However, by lobbying for culture the traditional owners risk buying into the modern baggage that comes with this term. Indigenous people are stereotyped by modern knowledge as cultural beings: they are not rational thinkers, they are not capable of objectivity, they do not ‘use’ ecological resources, and they do not have economic agency. As the aluminium smelter proponents in *Onus v Alcoa* argued, their interests in country are ‘entirely intellectual or emotional’. But all people have culture, westerners included. Indeed, the traditional owners have to emphasise cultural diversity because

their experience of the modern universals is that they are not actually universal at all. Furthermore, that they are partial, fragmented and driven by linear trajectories of progress.

Because of the problems with the word 'culture', the MLDRIN delegates sometimes substitute the phrase 'Indigenous water allocations' for cultural flows. This language does not come with the trappings of primitivism, but it is also less evocative of the rivers. Indeed, it evokes the storage and control of water, and thus offers implicit support for the conceptual foundations of modern water management.

On the MLDRIN website the following information about 'Indigenous water allocations' is posted (MLDRIN; see also Ross):

MLDRIN has as its core objective in the coming years the establishment and implementation of Indigenous Water Allocations. This water would be used for a cultural purpose; this means a water allocation would be used for whatever purpose the recipient Indigenous Nation deems culturally appropriate.

Through a negotiation process with each other and with the relevant jurisdiction, the traditional owners would decide where and when water would be released. The water could be used for cultural economic purposes such as to water a native food source or medicinal plant source, enable breeding of native animals through appropriate flooding of wetlands or other floodplain ecological system or send water to an important spiritual or cultural site.

An Indigenous Water Allocation will support the continuation of our cultural practices and could have significant environmental outcomes.

In this text, it is argued that an Indigenous water allocation *is* cultural, and culture is defined as whatever the traditional owners think is culturally appropriate. This is a tricky negotiation: appealing to the 'cultural box' within natural resource management, and then asserting that this box is unlimited. The formal language that identifies and translates culture reduces the arguments made earlier about the regeneration of life in the river country and weakens the vivid passion of the delegates when they speak more freely about cultural flows.

The language switches the MLDRIN delegates make between 'Indigenous water allocations' and 'cultural flows' is evidence of how influential modern water management thinking filters into the delegates' own thinking in their engagements with governments. But these language switches are also political. Politics is an inextricable component of the negotiations, and thus different language is used. This is illustrated by MLDRIN's strategic plan. The delegates developed two versions of their strategic plan: one for themselves and one that

is publicly available. Rhetoric is separate to practice. The delegates use the language of 'allocations', of water as a mute resource, in order to create more space for their own water 'management'. They use the authority of modern language to extend their authority: if humans are directing the allocation of water they can also participate in this activity. But they end up speaking a language that fits more easily within the knowledge framework of modern water management.

The complexity of this translation context, and the difficult choices that the traditional owners are presented with, can be illustrated further by comparing how the traditional owners relate cultural flows to environmental flows. Ancestral beings and cultural living are not part of the matrix examined by the hydrologists, ecologists and geomorphologists when deciding which wetlands to sustain with an environmental flow. Nor do the managers of environmental flows consider the ramifications of whose traditional country will miss out when they decide to water a wetland. Thus the traditional owners cannot rely on environmental flows to be responsive to their relationships with country. Indeed, they are keen to emphasise a distinction between cultural flows and environmental flows to policy-makers. However, articulating this distinction at the water management table is limited when meaning is confounded by modern thinking and political choices to use and subvert that modern thinking.

In July 2005 the MLDRIN delegates met with the CAC in Wagga Wagga, New South Wales, to discuss the meaning of cultural flows. At this meeting Steven Ross emphasised a synergy existing between cultural and environmental flows (Wagga Wagga, MLDRIN joint meeting with CAC, 13 July 2005). Matt Rigney agreed and said that the traditional owners needed environmental flows to take care of the birds, animals and fish. The development of environmental flows in government policy marks an important step towards the amodern arguments made by the traditional owners, and the delegates acknowledge this. If the river were flowing well, as it used to, naturally, then the traditional owners would not need to make arguments about cultural flows. But in the context of water scarcity and the dominance of consumptive uses of water in water management, the traditional owners continue to argue for cultural flows. As we have seen with The Living Murray, at this stage environmental flows only have a very limited size and territory. Indeed, as at September 2007 less than 1 per cent of total water currently available in the large storages has been allocated by governments for 'environmental use' (MDBC 4). Mary Pappin has spoken about how she appreciates environmental flows, but remains concerned that these flows are small and selective.

While environmental flows are a recognition by the policy-makers that the river has its own water needs, environmental flows are still a 'human-made' allocation of 'environmental water'. Environmental flows are constrained by the natural



resource management framework that prioritises economic values, perceives ecology and economy as oppositional goals, and presumes that humans are the only ones who have agency to intervene and direct river flows. The ongoing mentality that the river is a competitor for water is evident when environmental flows are illegally diverted by landholders. Dramatic jumps in water prices meant that it became cheaper for irrigators to steal water and pay the fine than to pay for water up front (Jenkin 3). This is also evident in the prioritisation of water allocations during times of water scarcity, when environmental flows are placed second behind consumptive water uses (Connell & Grafton 74–5).

Significantly, another reason why traditional owners are keen to establish a distinction between environmental and cultural flows is the negative effects of environmental flows. Environmental flows are complex undertakings, have had a mixed history of implementation, and are only recently being researched for their effectiveness (Smith 296; Blanch; Harman & Stewardson 113). Environmental flows might ‘top-up’ high flows from unregulated tributaries, to create a larger flooding event (Harman and Stewardson 113). Environmental flows can also be managed to drown out structures such as weirs so that migrating fish can pass (Thoms et al. 351). For the Darling River, the concept of environmental flows has to include the importance of periods of no flow, when the river runs dry (365). If environmental flows are to mimic variability, then it is not a matter of simply releasing water in a steady flow, but storing water for timed strategic releases or pulses. However, a cold environmental flow released from the bottom of a dam would be better described as thermal pollution. In addition to practical complexities in the implementation of environmental flows, the (mis)labelling of water for other purposes as ‘environmental’ contributes to their bad press. The unseasonal movement of water along ephemeral river beds to downstream irrigators, including the flooding of the Barmah–Millewa forest, has been called an environmental flow. Crisis measures to flush water down a river in response to an outbreak of blue-green algae have also been defined as environmental flows (Smith 296).

Both Lee and Henry have had bad experiences with environmental flows in the heartland of their country, the Barmah–Millewa wetlands. ‘Rain rejection flows’ flood this wetland with too many small floods at the wrong time of year, while the higher country is left dry. Henry spoke at the meeting with the CAC about how environmental flows had killed life in his country: ‘The environmental flow denies the Indigenous people access to hunt and gather their natural foods, plants and medicines’ [7 August 2004].

For Henry, environmental flows are a continuation of the destructive mismanagement of his country. Lee pessimistically regards an environmental flow as a flow that only farmers and irrigators gain from, as part of a knowledge framework within which the river is regarded as a resource for human consumption. Indeed,

the Barmah–Millewa wetlands are described by irrigators and river operators as a ‘choke’. Here, the tight twists of the Murray’s path slow down the river’s flow, or, as modern water managers have constructed it, ‘choke’ the delivery of water to downstream irrigators. However, since these interviews with Henry and Lee, a bigger environmental flow was released under The Living Murray to flood the Barmah–Millewa forest. I saw Lee at this time, in Echuca in October 2005. He was happy that a larger flood of water was spreading through the forest, but was still concerned that the flood did not go further into the bush. Lee remains worried about the way the monitoring of environmental flows is focused on fish and/or bird breeding, and not on encompassing all the life of country.

Part of the MLDRIN delegates’ argument for cultural flows relates to their political relationship and responsibilities with country. Mary Pappin made the distinction that environmental flows are controlled by the ‘white man’, and do not take care of country as it should be ‘culturally’. When the traditional owners speak about caring for country, they are speaking about a reciprocal relationship whereby country is also taking care of them. This is an authority they carry to their negotiations over water; however, this communication can become blighted when translated into natural resource management terms. This is evident in what Steven Ross has said about cultural flows (Corowa):

The outcome might be similar to an environmental flow, and it could be used to supplement an environmental flow, but it’s who has control of it, and who has control of the mechanism, and the timing, and where it goes.

For people familiar with connectivity thinking, this comment can be understood in context of responsibilities to country, a management that is not centred on human dominance of an inferior nature. However, Steven’s comment could be easily taken to describe just that, as it would be in a natural resource management context. As MLDRIN executive officer, Steven finds his role as an intermediary involves codifying his language for both sides, the traditional owners and government (pers. comm. October 2007). It is important to remember the highly charged political context of this dialogue. Ramsay Freeman has vividly summed up the difficult situation that the traditional owners face in their strategic engagements with government: ‘You can’t walk along a barbed wire fence with one foot in each paddock’ (pers. comm. October 2007).

Cultural flows are not a cultural copy of environmental flows, one taking care of cultural values, and the other taking care of environmental values. Cultural flows are part of the MLDRIN delegates’ critique of the dominant paradigms in water management today. This is a bigger vision of the cultural flow, which demands a philosophical shift in natural resource management. This bigger vision is perhaps not being communicated by Indigenous water allocations.

In practice, the realisation of cultural flows as a return to how the rivers were is an extremely challenging ambition of the traditional owners. The government has not accepted its own commissioned scientific research that recommends the return of 4000 gigalitres for a chance at restoring river health. The political consequences of reducing water allocations are too much of a challenge for governments. More significantly, with ongoing drought the government is not in a position to act on those recommendations. In September 2006, water storages in the Murray River System totalled 3350 gigalitres, one year later they total 2130 gigalitres (MDBC 3). Parched country meant that there was very little run-off into the storages from the 2007 autumn rains.

The realisation of any sort of cultural flow is now much more dependent on future rainfall than the negotiation skills of the MLDRIN delegates and the capacity of policy-makers to hear these arguments. If there is rain, and the storage levels rise, then the delegates may get their allocation of water for cultural flows. However, even though the traditional owners wish to recharge connectivity, it is likely that in the short term cultural flows will be realised from within the Murray River System. The cultural flows will have to be planned with respect to size and timing, moved through canals and channels, as regulated by weirs and locks. Pumps and pipes will be needed to breach the ruptured connection between the former wetlands now isolated from the rivers. And the hydrologists, ecologists and geomorphologists will provide valuable technical advice, gleaned from their experience with environmental flows. Hopefully for the traditional owners, and for all of us, even this cultural flow will be part of the many other catalysts that are already contributing to demands for the transformation of water management.

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