

Symposium Presentation No. 5

Barringgi Gadyin – The Wimmera River and Wotjobaluk Connection to Country

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Darren Griffin

Barringgi Gadyin is the *Wergaia* name for the whole entire system of the Wimmera River. Traditionally the river went down to a series of waterholes in dry times and then, when it flooded, it flooded across the whole landscape and it was all connected - land, water, people and the past.

Barengi Gadjin's mission statement is "Traditional Owners working together as custodians of culture, country, heritage, law and language". Traditional Owners have a cultural, ethical and legal responsibility to manage their cultural heritage on country. Land and water are fundamental to the cultural heritage and wellbeing of Aboriginal people. It's the core of all spirituality and this relationship to the spirit of country is what needs to be protected and celebrated.

We represent several language groups: the *Wergaia* to the north, the *Jadawadjali* from here across the Grampians to the border and up to Lake Buloke, the *Wotjobaluk*, *Jaadwa* and *Yupagulk* people covering the Grampians, the Wimmera and southern Mallee area.

We have legal authority for the *Wotjobaluk* claim area under the Native Title Act, the first claim in southeast Australia, in 2005. We're a registered Aboriginal party under the 2006 Aboriginal Heritage Act. That's when Aboriginal peoples' rights to manage their cultural heritage and their country came back. The Registered Aboriginal Parties (RAPs) in Victoria closely follow the native titles. *Barengi Gadjin* is one of the RAPs.

Our membership of about 250 Traditional Owners are people who can prove their links to apical ancestors on the native title claim. Apical ancestors are the furthest we can go back in historical records.

Linking Waterscapes Symposium

Ararat, June 2018

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Aboriginal people have a long history with the Wimmera River. Aboriginal people were over the whole of Australia 50,000 years ago. When we as humans think about such deep time, it's usually in religious ways. For Aboriginal people, that moment of creation is when human beings became conscious and we had language and we started naming things. This is encapsulated in what we call the Dreamtime. Through ceremony and art and dance, we can connect with our ancestors and the Dreamtime.

Sea levels and the climate stabilised 6,000 years ago and complex societies developed. In Australia, the hunter gatherers became more semi-sedentary and start developing aquaculture and agriculture. With increased population, really complex kinship and land management systems developed and were around at the time of contact with Europeans.

From 1859, all the apical ancestors were moved onto Ebenezer Mission on the Wimmera River, but still kept that connection to the River and other places on their country. The Missions were set up as a refuge to stop the violence against Aboriginal people. Ebenezer Mission was the first and proved to be successful. Ebenezer Mission is now owned and managed by *Barengi Gadjin*.

Since then, there have been many pieces of legislation and government policy, starting with the Aborigines Protection Act 1869 (the "Half-caste Act") through to the Native Title Act 1993 and the first successful Native Title consent determination in south-eastern Australia on 13 December 2005.

Ben Muir

The Lower Wimmera River Aboriginal Water Project aims to ensure local Traditional Owner values and uses of water are better incorporated in water resource planning and management in Victoria. It includes cultural values recording for the Lower Wimmera River, and targeted archaeological survey along *Krumelak* (Outlet Creek) from *Gurru* (Lake Hindmarsh) to *Ngelbakutya* (Lake Albacutya).

The creek has large numbers and a diverse range of scarred trees, many in excellent condition. Bark was used for canoes, houses, possum skin stretching and curing boards (bunya boards) for clothing and boomerangs. One of the indicators of intensification of land use is the increase in the use of mounds for habitation centres, garden beds, burial sites, and the repeated use and accumulation of earth ovens for cooking Murnong and other plants, and shellfish from the local lakes and swamps. There is also evidence that Indigenous groups dug drains and built fish traps in lakes and swamps.

Ben Muir's message was clear about the ways local Aborigines lived in their country. Aboriginal stories and archaeological research are expanding our knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal culture and the ways we can work together to value and care for the country.