



Kimberley Land Council



Media statement

10/5/2023

Petition to protect the Martuwarra Fitzroy River signed by more than 27,000 Australians delivered to WA Parliament

Kimberley Traditional Owners and conservation groups have delivered a petition signed by 27,632 Australians calling for the Martuwarra Fitzroy River to be protected.

The petition was delivered to Kimberley MP Divina D'Anna and Environment Minister Reece Whitby on Tuesday afternoon (May 9) on the steps of Parliament, urging the Premier and WA Government to stop all plans for large-scale water extraction in the Martuwarra Fitzroy River catchment and protect the river.

A delegation from the Kimberley Land Council, Martuwarra Fitzroy River Council, Environs Kimberley, and The Kimberley – Like Nowhere Else also held a special screening of the award-winning Voices of the River short film series in WA Parliament – showcasing the natural and cultural values of the National Heritage listed river and the importance of protecting it from damaging large-scale development.

Kimberley Land Council chief executive officer Tyrone Garstone said he hoped the petition would encourage the McGowan Government to meet with Traditional Owners on Country in the Fitzroy Valley and listen to what they want for their river.

“For tens of thousands of years Aboriginal people have lived along the Martuwarra Fitzroy River and share a deep and profound connection to the living waters. Traditional Owners are best placed to protect and manage this Country and should be consulted in decisions made on the future of their river,” he said.

“We want government to work with Traditional Owners to co-design sustainable development pathways for the Fitzroy Valley that align with culture and protect Country.”

Mr Garstone said there needed to be changes in legislation to give rights to Traditional Owners over their Country.

“Traditional Owners have not consented to water being taken from the river for large-scale development and despite native title being determined along the entire length of the Martuwarra, there is currently no legislation to give Traditional Owners the right to protect their river,” he said.

The meeting is the first time Traditional Owners from the Kimberley have visited Parliament House since January's catastrophic floods, which caused widespread damage throughout the Fitzroy Valley and loss of infrastructure, culture, and biodiversity.

Martuwarra Fitzroy River Council Chair Professor Anne Poelina said the devastating floods highlighted the risks that would come with large-scale development on the floodplains.

"The recovery from January's devastating floods is an opportunity to rebuild for a sustainable future. The growing impacts of climate change are being felt in the Kimberley, including extreme flooding events that put communities at risk and cause damage to culture and Country," she said.

"Laws, plans and policies in the region must properly address the rights, interests, and cultural responsibilities of Aboriginal people.

"The Martuwarra is a sacred ancestral being, with the right to live and flow. It is the most sacred entity in the West Kimberley region and is central to Aboriginal spirituality and First Law, customary law. The Martuwarra is the largest registered Aboriginal Cultural Heritage site in Western Australia and has been National Heritage Listed since 2011 and has been earmarked for World Heritage."

In 2021, 43,000 Australians sent submissions to the WA Government calling on them to abandon plans to extract more than 300 billion litres of water each year from the Martuwarra Fitzroy River.

Environs Kimberley director Martin Pritchard said a further 27,632 Australians had signed the petition to protect the Martuwarra.

"The WA Government cannot ignore how many people want the Martuwarra protected and how renowned it is for its cultural and ecological importance across Australia," he said.

"Proposals to allow large-sale water extraction from the river will cause irreversible harm. We've seen the irreparable damage to the Murray – Darling and we don't want to see that happen to the mighty Martuwarra."

The Kimberley – Like Nowhere Else campaign manager Monique Barker said there were many sustainable development options to build a modern and vibrant economy in the Fitzroy Valley without taking water from the river.

"The living waters of the river and floodplains support culture, the livelihoods of thousands of people, tourism, fishing, and rare wildlife such as the critically endangered freshwater sawfish," she said.

"Developments that take water from the river or its floodplains pose a serious risk to the river and its people by reducing life-giving flows and adding pollution to the fresh water and fragile ecosystems of the river."

Ends



Picture caption: Members from the Kimberley Land Council, Martuwarra Fitzroy River Council, Environs Kimberley and Pew Charitable Trusts deliver petition signed by 27,632 on steps of WA Parliament.

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