

Ngarrindjeri futures: negotiating a future through Caring for *Ruwe/Ruwar* (lands, waters and all living things)

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The Ngarrindjeri nation in southern South Australia, located in the Coorong, Lower Lakes and Murray Mouth region, use the term *Ruwe/Ruwar* to encapsulate the interconnection between country, body, and spirit. This interconnection is fundamental to wellbeing and it is for this reason that healthy lands and waters are critical to healthy Ngarrindjeri people and culture. Creation ancestors such as Ngurunderi give Ngarrindjeri traditional responsibility to care for *Ruwe/Ruwar*.

The regional, peak Indigenous organisation, the Ngarrindjeri Regional Authority (NRA), is leading negotiations and agreement-making with South Australian authorities to transform the existing natural resource and heritage management regimes in the region towards recognition and support for healthy Ngarrindjeri *Ruwe/Ruwar*. The strategy is structured around agreement-making and significant resourcing aimed at capacity building, and a 'cultural' shift in regional government programs. This cultural shift in natural resource management (NRM) requires a comprehensive, long-term effort by both Ngarrindjeri and non-Indigenous institutions and programs.

A shift in the relationship between the Ngarrindjeri nation and the State

Ngarrindjeri leaders argue that non-Indigenous respect for their beliefs and traditions is fundamental to social justice and is crucial in programs aimed at positive community development if 'closing the gap' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is to be achieved. In the twenty-first century, Ngarrindjeri have identified as a crucial challenge the creation of a future centred on caring for Country, which incorporates respect for traditions, cultural responsibility, self-determination and economic development. Reconciliatory and broader educational initiatives require a parallel, strategic socio-political plan for a healthy future for Ngarrindjeri people. The severe drought devastating the Murray-Darling Basin in the 2000s framed this ongoing Indigenous community challenge. Ngarrindjeri leaders sought a path through this environmental disaster that brought with it a greater opportunity for the community to develop a long-term caring for Country program aimed at education, training, employment and a sustainable Ngarrindjeri regional economy.



Younghusband Peninsula in Coorong National Park. ©Photo: DEWNR



The NRA includes in its vision for Ngarrindjeri people, the following overarching statement:

Our Lands, Our Waters, Our People, All Living Things are connected. We implore people to respect our Ruwe (Country) as it was created in the Kaldowinyeri (the Creation). We long for sparkling, clean waters, healthy land and people and all living things. We long for the Yarlumar-Ruwe (Sea Country) of our ancestors. Our vision is all people Caring, Sharing, Knowing and Respecting the lands, the waters and all living things. (Ngarrindjeri Nation 2006, p. 5)

This vision makes clear the essential link between the wellbeing of individuals, families, communities, their unique 'world view' and their right and responsibility to care for Ngarrindjeri lands and waters. This world view is gaining high level acceptance in the non-Indigenous context through South Australian Government recognition of the *Ngarrindjeri Nation Yarlumar-Ruwe Plan* (Ngarrindjeri Nation 2006), *Kungun Ngarrindjeri Yunnan* (KNY) agreements, and regional NRM planning.

Since the 1980s, educational programs such as *Camp Coorong: Race Relations and Education Centre* have developed and promoted an understanding of the Ngarrindjeri world view. Cultural values and histories are also communicated through publications, contributions to State education curricula, and cultural exhibitions in museums and art galleries (see Hemming et al. 2010). In recent years the political strategy, relying on a positive shift in non-Indigenous acceptance of Ngarrindjeri beliefs and traditions, has challenged the South Australian Government to provide Ngarrindjeri with the capacity to take a leading role in caring for Country.

Kungun Ngarrindjeri Yunnan agreements, the Murray-Darling Basin and Ngarrindjeri futures

In 2009, the Ngarrindjeri nation in South Australia negotiated a new agreement with the State of South Australia that recognised traditional ownership of their lands and waters and established a process for negotiating and supporting rights and responsibilities for country *Ruwe/Ruwar* (see Hemming et al. 2011). In line with Ngarrindjeri political and legal strategies, it takes the form of a whole-of-government contractual agreement between the Ngarrindjeri nation and the State of South Australia, called a *Kungun Ngarrindjeri Yunnan* agreement (KNY – 'Listen to what Ngarrindjeri have to say'). It provides for a resourced, formal structure for meetings and negotiations between the Ngarrindjeri nation, as represented through the Ngarrindjeri Regional Authority, and government, universities, and other non-Indigenous organisations (see Ngarrindjeri Nation 2006).

The 2009, the whole-of-government KNY agreement was set in place to frame the strategy for negotiating Ngarrindjeri interests in NRM and, in particular, to enable community a key role in the South Australian Government's long-term plan for the Coorong, Lower Lakes and Murray Mouth. This is a legal, binding agreement entered into between Ngarrindjeri and various Ministers of the Crown in South Australia to articulate specific rights and obligations that provide the beginnings of a new, more just relationship. Recitals D and E (Hemming et al. 2011, p. 110) provide an indication of the intentions of the agreement:



D. The Ministers have expressed a desire for a new relationship between the State of South Australia and Ngarrindjeri based upon mutual respect and trust acknowledging that Ngarrindjeri consider protection and maintenance of culture and cultural sites upon its land and water central in every respect to Ngarrindjeri community well being and existence.

E. By this Agreement the Ministers wish to provide support and resources to the Ngarrindjeri Regional Authority Inc and enter into negotiations and consultations with the Ngarrindjeri about the maintenance and protection of Ngarrindjeri culture and cultural sites and the natural resources of the Land [lands and waters].

This KNY agreement provides for the establishment and funding of a joint taskforce, creating a formal context for the NRA to negotiate with the South Australian Government regarding its programs on Ngarrindjeri *Ruwe/Ruwar*. The agreement also includes recognition of Ngarrindjeri traditional ownership, the NRA as the peak body, and an agreement to negotiate on key long-held objectives such as the ‘hand-back’ of the Coorong National Park. KNY taskforce meetings provide a forum for the NRA to work with the State Government to build Ngarrindjeri caring for Country programs, and to secure the resourcing and expertise to effectively respond to government requests for ‘informed consent’ and ‘participation’ by the community in the state’s environmental programs.

Through a Federal/State Regional Partnership Agreement, the 2009 KNY agreement, and the Ngarrindjeri Partnerships Project (part of the State’s Murray Futures Program), the NRA has secured the establishment of specialised positions that support the ongoing responsibility of Ngarrindjeri people for maintaining the wellbeing of *Ruwe/Ruwar*. These funded programs also prioritise the development of employment, training and economic opportunities associated with caring for Country.

Over the last decade, the authors of this chapter have been working closely with the Ngarrindjeri nation on community-based research programs. This work has focused on building capacity in cultural and natural resource management, economic development, and community governance. As part of this developing program, Rigney and Hemming have established the Ngarrindjeri Regional Authority (NRA) Research, Policy and Planning Unit (NRARPPU), hosted by Flinders University. NRARPPU is now the unit responsible for advising on NRA research and policy issues, with a particular focus on natural and cultural resource management. A key outcome of this strategic research and planning direction is that significant resourcing has been secured for NRA capacity-building from the South Australian Government’s *Murray Futures* programs. This will ensure that the NRA’s research development, training, employment and economic programs will be significantly supported through state and Commonwealth NRM programs for at least five years from 2011 to 2015.



Ngarrindjeri graduation ceremony: (standing left to right) Aaron Long, Simon Wanganeen, Heather Osborne, Arnold Love, Craig Sumner, Ron Clarke, Raymond Rigney, Russell Rigney and Daryl Long; (kneeling left to right) Joe Koolmatrjie, Hon Paul Caica MP (Minister for Sustainability, Environment and Conservation), Anthony Camilleri, Cyril Trevorrow, Laura Long and Tim Hartman. ©Photo: DEWNR

Long-term planning, negotiation and the broad education of government officials has been essential for the Ngarrindjeri nation (using the KNY agreement strategy) to bring about such a significant change to the landscape of Indigenous affairs in the Lower Murray region. The usual model of engagement was for government to consult with the ‘Aboriginal community’, often represented as stakeholders, through funded consultants or government departments, in an attempt to obtain ‘support’ for government plans, project and agendas. The NRA took the position that this kind of engagement must be radically re-configured and its colonising power relations transformed with resources being re-directed to the NRA for capacity building and long-term community development. This political move was grounded on a critical Indigenous place-based strategy. It required hard negotiations led by lawyers, ongoing independent legal advice, research and planning, and a willingness to take a principled stand on the basis of future benefit. The majority of work conducted in this establishment phase was not resourced and Ngarrindjeri leadership’s contributions of time have continued to be largely voluntary.

Conclusion

With formal agreements, careful planning and funded programs, the NRA has designed a strategic approach to secure improved Ngarrindjeri wellbeing for community, family and individuals. This approach to addressing Indigenous disadvantage and resultant poor health requires strong and experienced Indigenous leadership, independent legal advice, partnerships with universities and other non-Indigenous institutions and generous government support. Governments need to support Indigenous self-determination through long-term, coordinated and regional programs.

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