

Ngarrindjeri Perspective on Ramsar Issues

Ngarrindjeri/Ramsar Working Group

17/6/98

This paper, providing the consensus Ngarrindjeri view on Ramsar issues, was prepared by the Ngarrindjeri/Ramsar Working Group and has been endorsed by the Ngarrindjeri Community. It is now presented to the Ramsar Planning Team for inclusion (without change) into the Ramsar draft management plan for the Lakes and the Coorong.

The Ngarrindjeri Working Group were elected by members of a Ngarrindjeri Community Meeting held at Camp Coorong on Saturday 7th March and were confirmed as delegates at a Ngarrindjeri Community Meeting held in Adelaide on the 27th March 1998.

The Working Group met on six occasions with Mike Hinsliff, a consultant working with the Ramsar Planning Team, to produce this draft paper. Steve Hemming assisted the Working Group throughout the process.

The paper represents a balance between what Ngarrindjeri believe and want to say and what is appropriate to put into a management document that will be read by a national and international audience.

The Working Group was composed of the following delegates;

Douglas Wilson, Henry Rankin, Neville Gollan, Tom Trevorrow, Liz Tongerrie, Victor Wilson, Derek Gollan, a representative from the SE (unable to attend), a representative from the Riverland (unable to attend).

The following people also attended some meetings and contributed to the workshops;

Eunice Aston, Alan Jackson, George Trevorrow and Val Power. Darren Hincks (site register officer - DOSAA) attended some meetings with Mike Hinsliff for community contact and career development purposes.

1.0 The Ngarrindjeri Perspective

Introduction

This section attempts to present the views of the indigenous people who are the traditional owners of the lower River Murray, Lakes and Coorong. It provides an additional perspective on the Ramsar values and issues of the Planning Area.

The wider community consultation mechanisms used in the preparation of this plan (community reference group and discussion papers) were available to the Ngarrindjeri community but these planning tools are the product of a mainstream cultural view of how government and the community should interact. These techniques are not culturally appropriate for Ngarrindjeri people. The Planning Team recognised this limitation and undertook a separate consultation process with the Ngarrindjeri. A community meeting and workshop approach was used in an attempt to obtain a consensus Ngarrindjeri view. It is acknowledged that this approach had a timeline that limited the extent of Ngarrindjeri discussion and consideration of the issues.

This section was prepared for the approval of the Ngarrindjeri community by a Ngarrindjeri Working Group working with a Ramsar consultant. Delegates were elected by and from the Ngarrindjeri community. The text has been approved by the Ngarrindjeri Community and is presented here without alteration.

1.1.1. Synopsis of the Section

- Ngarrindjeri people strongly support the Ramsar principles and objectives.
- The production and implementation of a Ramsar Plan provides an opportunity for reconciliation.
- Ngarrindjeri seek a more valuable role in the future management of the natural and cultural resources contained within the Ramsar planning area. Ngarrindjeri believe such a role would be beneficial to all members of the community, not just Ngarrindjeri.
- Ngarrindjeri support moves aimed at increasing water flow and water quality for environmental purposes.
- Ngarrindjeri seek improvements to the cultural heritage management system operating within the planning area.
- Ngarrindjeri support extensions to the Coorong National Park and the comprehensive management of ecotourism and public use in all sensitive areas.

1.1.2. Ngarrindjeri Culture and History

Ngarrindjeri people are the indigenous owners of the Lower Murray, Lakes and Coorong region.

Dreaming “stories” (cultural and spiritual histories), archaeological, anthropological and historical evidence all support Ngarrindjeri traditional ownership.

The Ngarrindjeri peoples' lands have been stolen by the process of European settlement. This dispossession continues to take place through the denial of rights to protect important cultural sites such as the Hindmarsh Island area.

The theft of Ngarrindjeri lands took place against the official direction of the British Parliament. In 1838 an *Act* to amend *the South Australia Act* was passed. Among amendments was the following clause;

nothing in the said letters patent contained shall affect or be construed to affect the Rights of any aboriginal Natives of the said province to the actual Occupation or Enjoyment in their own Persons, or in the persons of their descendants, of any lands therein then actually occupied or enjoyed by such Natives.

Despite attempts by early officials such as Governor Gawler, and the Protector of Aborigines, Mathew Moorhouse, to protect Aboriginal property rights, the Ngarrindjeri land was stolen.

Many Ngarrindjeri people have died as a result of the theft of their lands, the desecration of their culture, introduced diseases and murder. Ngarrindjeri people continue to die through stress related illnesses at a far higher rate than non -Aboriginal Australians. Ngarrindjeri life expectancy for men and women is significantly lower than the non Aboriginal population.

Ngarrindjeri people have survived. Although their culture has been severely affected by European invasion, Ngarrindjeri people still have a distinct culture. They have been able to maintain a continuous and unique association with their lands. Ngarrindjeri people have fished, hunted, gathered and lived across their lands. In recent times access to certain parts of their lands has been more difficult to obtain.

Successive governments have attempted to destroy Ngarrindjeri culture through forced Christianisation and Missionisation. Policies such as protectionism, segregation and assimilation have all had cultural genocide as their planned outcomes. Every Ngarrindjeri family has experienced the trauma of the theft of their children by the Government.

Continued damage to Ngarrindjeri lands threatens the health of the Ngarrindjeri people. The continuing degradation of the River Murray, Lakes and Coorong is a crucial threat. The proposal to build a bridge to Hindmarsh Island has caused major trauma in the Ngarrindjeri community.

The Ngarrindjeri lands - in particular the River, the Lakes and the Coorong are crucial for the survival of the Ngarrindjeri people. They have a spiritual and religious connection with the land and the living things associated with it. The fish, birds and other living things are the Ngartjis (totems) of the Ngarrindjeri people. Many Ngarrindjeri people have a strong spiritual connection to their Ngartjis and a responsibility to protect them. Without their Ngartjis they believe they cannot survive.

Just before he died at Goolwa in August 1935, a Ngarrindjeri man, who had lived a considerable portion of his life in camps in the lower Murray Lakes region, wrote an

account of his life story. Towards the end of his account of Ngarrindjeri history and culture, he made the following heartfelt statement:

I always thought of my kind [o]ld Grandfather and grand mother that took care of me never a child was cared so much as I was and being a half caste shame on the white race I would sooner be a full Blooded aborigine my blood boil at times I scorn the white man because I know I know He is the low wicked blaggard that took my country from my Grandmother... my father or Grandfather [,] on the white man side the European did He have any [th]ing that he got lawfully...

This is a strong statement which serves to remind readers of his story of the dreadful impact of the European invasion of South Australia on the Ngarrindjeri people. This man's son gave his life fighting for Australia in World War I.

1.1.3. Ngarrindjeri Cultural and Spiritual Values

- Through culture, history and spirituality the Ngarrindjeri are bonded with, in fact are part of, the river, Lower Murray Lakes and Coorong.
- Maintaining (looking after) the environment is something that the Ngarrindjeri must do. It is the same as, or an extension of, looking after oneself.
- Ngarrindjeri have responsibilities to their Elders and ancestors to look after the country and the burial sites and other culturally significant places that still exist.
- Ngarrindjeri, through multi-generational association with particular camping and fishing sites, have an ongoing, living association with the planning area, including the Coorong National Park.
- Certain families have connections to specific places.
- The sense of feeling, sense of belonging, sense of responsibility for the river, Lakes and Coorong experienced by Ngarrindjeri people has survived occupation, dispersal and attempted assimilation. It continues to exist irrespective of where Ngarrindjeri people currently live. The link with the land lies at the heart and soul of Ngarrindjeri culture. A proper relationship and role in the management of the land is a fundamental platform in building and maintaining Ngarrindjeri culture and Ngarrindjeri self respect. Ngarrindjeri believe that their future involvement in the management of the land would be positive and beneficial to all members of the community, not just Ngarrindjeri. It would represent a significant step in the process of reconciliation and co-existence. The strengthening of Ngarrindjeri people and their culture requires a serious involvement in the management of their traditional lands.
- Many Ngarrindjeri people still retain a special spiritual relationship with specific wildlife species occurring within the planning area. This totemic relationship is deeply embedded in Ngarrindjeri culture and spirituality. Many Ngarrindjeri people have their own Ngartji or special friend. This association with wildlife provides a special perspective on Ramsar values and the maintenance of habitats.

1.1.4. Water Flow and Water Quality

The waters flowing down the Murray Darling System bring life to the river, Lakes and Coorong. The waters bring life to the Ngarrindjeri too. This is both a practical and a spiritual statement. There are extensive culturally significant teachings explaining how the Ngarrindjeri world was created. Ngurunderi and the Seven Sisters are two of many teachings which describe how the land and water, animals and people came to be what and who they are.

Too much water has been diverted from the river system and not enough water now reaches the Lakes and Coorong. The quality of the water has also fallen. The water is cloudy, polluted and not fit for drinking. The Murray, the Lakes and the Coorong are no longer environmentally healthy and this is partly why the Ngarrindjeri people are not healthy. The Ngarrindjeri know that the Coorong, Lakes and River are dying.

Ngarrindjeri are concerned about the process of water management and water diversions within the Murray Darling Basin, they accept the reality of supplying the water needs of Adelaide and other towns. They also accept agricultural land and water use but believe that federal, state and local government have a responsibility to the Australian community to work together effectively and promptly to maintain the ecological processes that support the natural environment of the river, Lakes and Coorong.

Ngarrindjeri believe that;

- more water should be made available to reach the Lakes and Coorong . That more water will help to support all life and nourish Ngarrindjeri country, Ngarrindjeri culture and Ngarrindjeri people.
- the quality of the water should be improved. The Murray Darling Commission and the state governments should find ways to reduce the turbidity (cloudiness), the nutrient and pollution levels of the water and try to make the water fit to drink - for people and for birds and animals.
- the U.S.E. drainage waters should be added to the Coorong at Salt Creek. Many Ngarrindjeri Elders can remember freshwater flows into the Coorong during the late 1950s and believe that these flows brought new life to the southern lagoon. Ngarrindjeri understands and shares concerns about potential nutrient and heavy metals being present in the waters of the Upper SE Drainage Scheme and supports the use of mechanisms to store and clean the water before final disposal into the Coorong.
- the landowners within the drainage areas should also contribute with wise land use to limit nutrient/pollutant run off from their properties.
- the manipulation of the barrages, and the manipulation of Lake levels to improve natural environmental processes is supported by Ngarrindjeri, particularly if this is in association with increased water flows and an improvement in water quality.

- the introduction of a fish passage into the barrages is a positive step and that this proposal is supported.

1.1.5. Future Management of the Ramsar Area

The Ngarrindjeri perspective on the management of the natural and cultural resources of the Ramsar area is based upon the view that Ngarrindjeri are essentially excluded from the decision making processes and that they wish to play a more valuable management role in the future.

Ngarrindjeri notes that the Ramsar Convention, through its various committees and publications supports and encourages an increased involvement of indigenous people in the planning and management of Wetlands of International Importance. That the Convention recognises the contribution that indigenous people can make and that it expresses the view that indigenous communities should benefit from the implementation of wise use.

Ngarrindjeri believe that they are currently excluded from management because of historic events during the 19th and 20th Centuries that;

- took their land away
- segregated them into Mission communities
- did not provide citizenship rights until the 1960's.
- other social, economic and cultural pressures which collectively were prejudicial to Ngarrindjeri indigenous rights and culture.

Collectively all these factors have resulted in both a fragmentation of Ngarrindjeri culture, with a consequent loss of confidence and the development by the majority culture of a negative, prejudicial and sometimes racist view of the Ngarrindjeri people. These factors have resulted in both state and local government operating over an extended period of time without including Ngarrindjeri wishes into their policies and decisions. The difficulties of cross cultural communication exacerbate this process. While some success has been achieved in recent years (Granite Island etc) and the efforts by some to change the situation are acknowledged, the overall picture remains that;

- the fundamental management framework, constructed over time by governments, still works (often unintentionally) to exclude Ngarrindjeri.
- the regional community expects, based upon their previous experience, that the future of the region will be developed with little or no involvement from Ngarrindjeri.

To begin the process of correcting these historic deficiencies, the Ngarrindjeri people believe that;

- all change must start with attitudes. This is why reconciliation, truth and justice is so important. The majority culture (the immigrants and their descendants) must recognise the indigenous Ngarrindjeri for who they are. With recognition and understanding of

the Ngarrindjeri culture and an acceptance and tolerance of difference, the possibility exists for the development of respect for Ngarrindjeri values and aspirations.

- with recognition and respect comes the possibility of finding new ways for Ngarrindjeri to be involved in the management of the region, the Wetland of International Importance and the economic activities and opportunities that might be created in the future.

Ngarrindjeri wish to be responsible for the management of land and cultural resources within the region, where those lands and cultural resources are important to Ngarrindjeri people. Ngarrindjeri have for some time now demonstrated a capacity to manage their own affairs examples such as Kalpparin, Camp Coorong and large, Murray Bridge, Raukkan and Meningie CDEP projects indicate a recent track record in sound management.

Ngarrindjeri people believe they are the native title holders within the planning area. However, Ngarrindjeri also believe that the process of settlement of native title claims can be worked separately from the process of advancing Joint Management. Such an approach would make possible a negotiated arrangement between Ngarrindjeri and the State Government which enabled joint management over areas such as the Coorong National Park to proceed.

Alternatively an increased involvement in management may be possible through some mechanisms not yet conceived or negotiated.

Any negotiated arrangement needs to be;

- in writing and providing government recognition of Ngarrindjeri rights.
- likely to succeed. It will include funding and support packages that clearly give Ngarrindjeri a chance to succeed.
- able to provide adequate and appropriate training over an extended period of time. Thereby enabling the Ngarrindjeri community to prepare young people properly for the challenge of management, again ensuring the strongest possibility of ongoing success.
- able to provide support for indigenous managers from both government sources and from Elders within the community.

While Ngarrindjeri already have some legal means of protecting cultural heritage on private land (Aboriginal Heritage Act 1988) they prefer to base sound management of heritage on the maintaining of good relationships and understandings with private landowners.

Ngarrindjeri have a cultural interest on private land within the planning area, including Lake shore land currently managed for agricultural purposes. These lands often contain indigenous cultural and burial sites and also form part of culturally significant stories, teachings and traditions. Ngarrindjeri desire that in the future they can make arrangements with large private landowners so that they may have access to some locations (under mutually agreed conditions) for cultural purposes.

The effective protection of indigenous cultural sites on private and public property remains a concern for Ngarrindjeri. Mechanisms that ensure a proper consideration of indigenous site values in the assessment of development proposals are still needed.

1.1.6. Development and Management of Public Use

Ngarrindjeri believes that approvals for developments, particularly large built developments within the Ramsar Planning Area need very careful scrutiny. The principle of confining developments to existing towns is generally supported, though exceptions to this may need to be made in order to take best commercial advantage of a development opportunity or conversely, to protect values (including indigenous cultural values) that may occur within towns. In relation to the formal assessment of development proposals, this plan needs to set out workable legislative strategies to ensure that any potential impacts to Ramsar values are identified and properly considered by planning authorities (these values should include indigenous cultural values).

Land management authorities and local government, in association with the Ngarrindjeri community and the general regional community, should also pro-actively identify the best and most appropriate sites for development. In this way a proper assessment of the Ramsar values can form part of the planning process prior to a developer submitting a planning application. This is particularly relevant to development of tourism infrastructure.

Ngarrindjeri would like to see effective management of tourism and ecotourism operators within the Ramsar area and particularly within the National Park. Operators should be licensed and should meet standards and guidelines which are set with some Ngarrindjeri community input.

Visitors should be managed within the Ramsar area and particularly within the National Park. That management should aim to provide a range of opportunities for visitors while protecting the Ramsar values (including indigenous cultural sites and values). Ngarrindjeri believe that, with proper management, additional ecotourism opportunities can be developed within the region and that Ngarrindjeri should share in the employment which might flow from such developments.

Ngarrindjeri believe that any increase in tourism activity should be carefully managed, with Ngarrindjeri involvement in that process. Increased activity should not just be allowed to happen.

Without prejudicing possible Ngarrindjeri interests in land within the area, Ngarrindjeri believe that the existing Coorong National Park should be extended to include the Sir Richard Peninsula and the waters of the Coorong up to the Goolwa barrages, and possibly beyond. This is in order to manage public use in the important habitat and cultural areas near Hindmarsh Island.

Ngarrindjeri emphasise that they have strong cultural connections to locations around Hindmarsh Island, Goolwa and the Goolwa channel. Ngarrindjeri support the production of a Conservation Plan for Hindmarsh Island, based on sound Ramsar principles and the recognition of indigenous cultural values.

All boat users should be controlled within the Ramsar area by a system of water space zoning to protect sensitive areas and habitats and provide balanced access for all recreation users.

Ngarrindjeri people seek ongoing opportunities to showcase their culture within the region and to provide ongoing educational and interpretive opportunities for visitors to the region.

1.1.7. Cultural Heritage Sites

The Ramsar site contains an archaeological record spanning over 5 000 years of continuous Ngarrindjeri occupation. The extensive range of cultural sites have an international significance. The culturally significant sites, which occur throughout the Ramsar area, on public and private land, inside and outside townships are all valued by the Ngarrindjeri. Ngarrindjeri have a keen sense of responsibility towards all sites and they were directed by their Elders (past and present) to look after those sites.

Along with concerns over the security of cultural and spiritual sites associated with the proposed Hindmarsh Island Bridge, Ngarrindjeri also believe that the proposed bridge development is a destructive influence to Ramsar environmental values within the region. The majority of Ngarrindjeri people remain totally opposed to the building of the bridge.

Ngarrindjeri have for a number of years worked with local authorities to resolve issues relating to conflicts between recent land use and site protection. Working under the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 1988* Ngarrindjeri have successfully resolved most issues to the satisfaction of all parties. However, much still needs to be done.

Where difficulties have been experienced (e.g. Hindmarsh Island Bridge) they were, at least in part, due to Ngarrindjeri not having access to adequate resources and professional advice. The cultural heritage management system used by Ngarrindjeri (under the provisions of *the Aboriginal Heritage Act 1988*) was simply unable to properly deal with a major development application.

Ngarrindjeri believe that an improved system is needed for adequately managing cultural heritage and for dealing with sites subject to, or likely to be subject to, development.

Such a system would;

- establish a revitalised, adequately funded, Ngarrindjeri Heritage Committee which operates under legislation to manage cultural resources, implement the system and liaise with landowners and authorities. The committee would be the custodian of the cultural information and records on behalf of the Ngarrindjeri community.
- reflect the international value of the resource.
- provide for continual assessment and the development of a culturally appropriate method for the inventory of sites.
- Identify sites requiring protective management action.
- provide a site assessment and report service for local government and other authorities.
- set priorities for protective management action and arrange for works to occur.
- Identify locations, sites and groups of sites of particular significance or vulnerability that should form no entry areas and from which the public are excluded (eg possibly some sections of the Coorong National Park and some of the Coorong Islands).

1.1.8. Environment and Land Management

Ngarrindjeri would like to see the following occur;

- large scale revegetation projects around some sections of the Lakes and adjacent to and inland from the Coorong. Rising saline ground water is best combated by extensive revegetation.
- substantial linear sections of private land adjacent to the Lakes fenced off and stock excluded to encourage regrowth of native vegetation. Water could be pumped to provide the necessary stock water. The intention is to provide a variety of habitats and increase biodiversity along the Lakes margin.
- continue to implement extensive pest plant and animal control programs throughout the Ramsar area but with special attention to the Coorong National Park. The extensive Ngarrindjeri CDEP workforce could play a major role in this work under appropriate arrangements.
- explore the possibility of fauna re-introductions to the Coorong dune system (Younghusband Peninsula)
- manage potential small wetlands around the margins of the Lower Murray and Lakes as waterfowl and wader habitat. Such areas as those near Wellington and along the East coast of Lake Albert (Waitowa) could provide additional habitat areas.
- encourage a review of land use and potential future development in the watercourses that enter the lakes from the Mount Lofty Ranges. The aim should be to limit interruptions to the watercourses and limit pollution. The building of houses and other developments close to stream beds and waterways should be closely managed, if not prohibited.

1.1.9. Approaching and Negotiating With Ngarrindjeri

It may be useful to explain that Ngarrindjeri for mainly cultural reasons, but also for practical reasons have difficulty utilising the standard methods of consultation, negotiation and decision making used by the wider community. Ngarrindjeri make major decisions by consensus of community members. Community members are often physically and financially separated and community decision making can be a slow and involved process to both arrange and to enact. Written correspondence and replies are not always an effective means of communication. Ngarrindjeri are always extremely busy on community business and their time is at a premium. Ngarrindjeri can and do participate in meetings where they conform to the conventions of the wider society but they are not comfortable doing so and they do not like making decisions on behalf of their people in these forums. They are uncomfortable when confronted with large meetings where they are minority participants. The following are practical suggestions for organisations wishing to consult/negotiate with Ngarrindjeri.

- consult early.
- write formally to the recognised responsible group and follow up with a phone call to arrange a meeting.
- accept that a response from the community will take time and will follow a period of community discussion. Maintain a dialogue while waiting.
- adopt working groups, on site meetings and formal meetings where Ngarrindjeri do not feel isolated, seriously out numbered and where the majority of business is directly relevant to Ngarrindjeri.
- seek guidance from the Ngarrindjeri people over gender balance issues. It may be necessary to have separate male/female consultation.

This is the consensus view of the Ngarrindjeri working party

This document is endorsed by the Ngarrindjeri Community at

...MURRAY BRIDGE South Australia

On the 29th day of May 1998