

Victorian Red Gum Forests

An Historic Victory

Five days after Christmas, I joined Aboriginal representatives and campaigners from the Victorian National Parks Association and the Wilderness Society outside the Victorian Premier's Media Centre. Over the past ten years we had called for every hectare of Victoria's Crown Land red gum forests to be protected and on December 30, the Victorian government announced that 90% of it would be protected - 91,000 hectares of new red gum conservation reserves. We had insisted on Aboriginal joint management, and in a state first, this too was part of the announcement. Brumby and his environment minister Gavin Jennings announced a massive victory for environmental justice.

Moments like this are rare, and until now, outside my experience. There was an eerie stillness, an unreality almost. We shook hands and politely chatted with advisers dragged in from holidays. We saw Brumby and Jennings only on the screen, creating this historic moment seemingly in a vacuum. Not even the adrenaline of speaking to camera pierced the balloon in which I was suspended. It was only a month later, floating on my back in the Barmah Lake beneath a sky flanked by red gums that the enormity of it all rushed over me.

There is much work to do, ensuring the announcement is faithfully transcribed into legislation and then well implemented. We also need to ensure our successes are built upon – both by seeking what we missed out on this time around, and perhaps most importantly, by scouring the campaign history for lessons that can be incorporated into our movement, making it stronger, more effective and more socially just.

Red gum forests lie mostly within the Riverina Bioregion which straddles the NSW-Victorian border. Largely due to the relatively small economic scale of the red gum logging industry, the Riverina never benefitted from the comprehensive land use assessments and conservation outcomes that resulted elsewhere from the 1990s Regional Forest Agreement process. This, despite the severe ecological degradation caused by the industry

on 266,000 hectares of State Forests (plus a further 250,000 ha of Western Lands Leases and an unknown but significant area of private land in NSW). In 2002, the Victorian red gum campaign was successful in obtaining a commitment from the then Bracks-led Labor government to conduct a regional assessment. This assessment would cover the two-fifths of red gum state forest area on the southern side of the border, and set in train the events that led to Brumby's December 30 announcement. The NSW government continues to obfuscate and delay dealing with the problem.

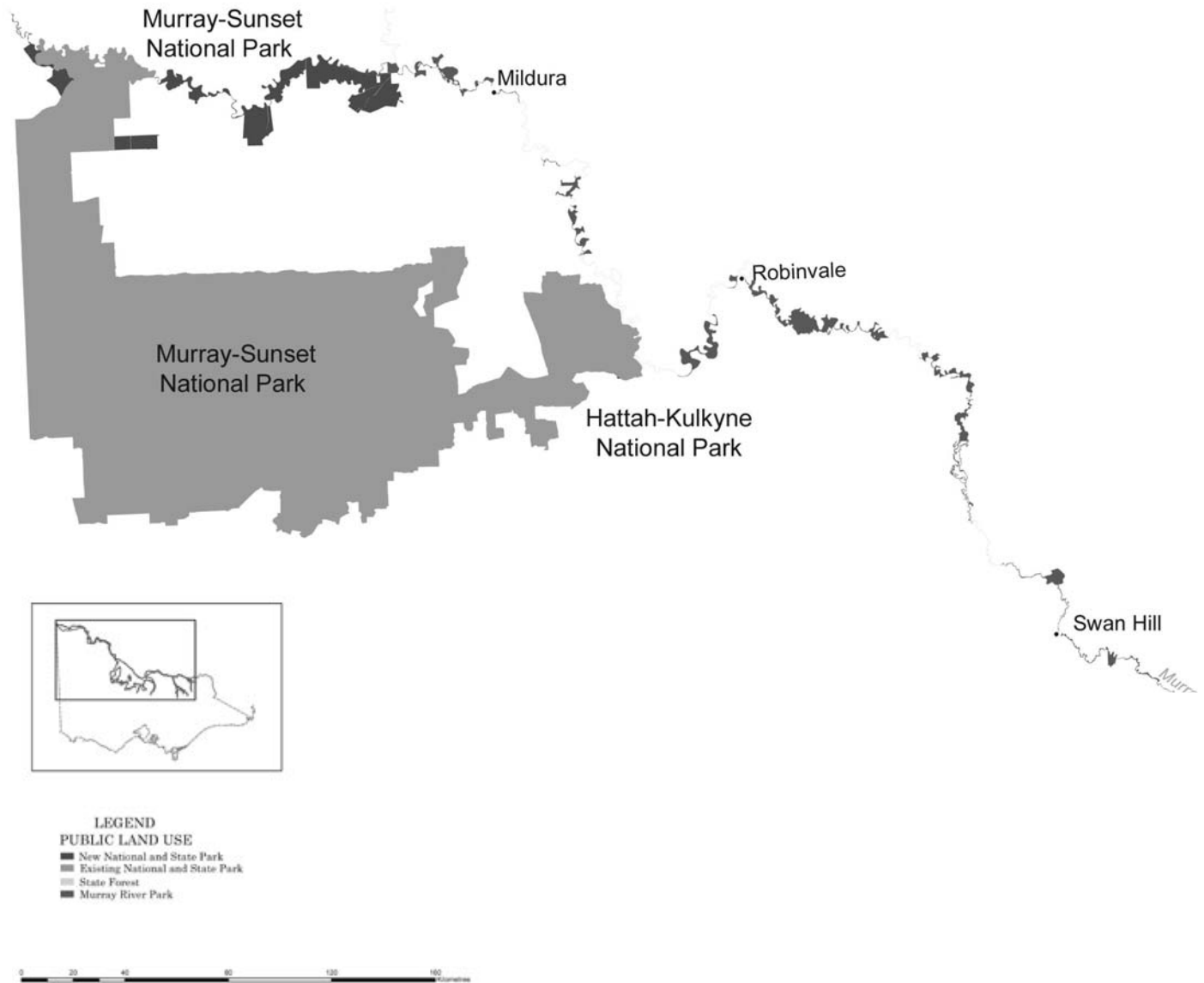
For Friends of the Earth, the most exciting aspect of the Victorian announcement was the commitment to co-manage significant areas with the Yorta Yorta and Wadi Wadi peoples. Making a tangible contribution to land justice was the original motivation for many of our red gum campaign team, the Barmah-Millewa Collective, and has remained a core objective throughout our ten year history. Along with the Yorta Yorta people, FoE led the charge to ensure the terms of reference for the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council Red Gum Investigation included an assessment of joint management options.

The following pages assess what we have achieved in Victoria and are still to achieve in New South Wales, by reflecting on the origins of our historic green-black collaboration and describing the exciting future we have planned for it.

Jonathan La Nauze is FoE Melbourne's Red Gum Campaign Coordinator.

Wedge-tailed eagles nest in a river red gum. Barmah Forest.
Photo: Jonathan La Nauze

Victorian Red Gum Forests: Goals and Results of the Barmah-Millewa Campaign



Goal: Joint management legislation.

New legislation or amendments to the National Parks Act to allow for Aboriginal management of national parks. At a minimum, the legislation needs to allow for the 'handback-leaseback' model, in which land is handed back to the Traditional Owners, who subsequently lease it to the government to be managed as a National Park. In exchange, they receive rent payments and majority control of the park via a Board of Management, as well as a range of employment and training initiatives in park management.

Results: The National Parks Act will be amended to allow for both co-management and joint management options in all Victorian national parks. Joint management refers to the handback-leaseback model. Co-management is effectively joint management without the land handback.

Goal: Joint management of specific parks covering the Nyah, Barmah and Gunbower forests.

(Environment groups and the Barapa Barapa people only joined forces late in the campaign, agreeing in March 2008 to fight for a jointly managed Gunbower National Park. The Wamba Wamba and Yorta Yorta Nations also have an interest in Gunbower.)

Results: Immediate negotiation of co-management agreements with the Yorta Yorta over a new Barmah National Park and the Wadi Wadi over a new Nyah-Vinifera Park. We will campaign to upgrade this commitment to full joint management. A range of other valuable measures will also be put in place to improve Aboriginal rights to natural resources, land and participation in the management of other forests such as Gunbower. These including advisory committees, capacity building initiatives and the protection of rights to hunt, gather and conduct cultural practice.

Goal: New conservation reserves.

Due to the highly depleted nature of the river red gum system, we believe all remnants must be protected in permanent conservation reserves, provided Traditional Owner rights are preserved in these areas. The nationally agreed reserve criteria set a target of 15% of the pre-1750 distribution of each forest type to be protected in permanent reserves. Due to high levels of historic clearing in Victoria, protecting all publicly owned red gum forests would only just reach this 15% target.

Results: Red gum in permanent reserves increases from 69,640ha to 161,000ha, bringing the reservation status for Victorian red gum forests to 14 % of their pre-European extent. The announcement includes four new national parks (Barmah, Gunbower, Lower Goulburn and Warby Range-Ovens River) as well as numerous smaller reserves and significant national park expansions. Additionally, most of the remaining River Murray corridor outside of the reserve system will become a 37,000 ha "Murray River Park," managed under the Crown Lands (Reserves) Act. This classification protects

it from logging and other intensive industries but places fewer restrictions on recreation than in a conservation reserve. The big loser in the announcement is the Gunbower Forest, nearly two-thirds of which will remain State Forest. FoE remains committed to the complete protection of Gunbower and the neighbouring Guttrum and Benwell forests.

Goal: Bans on stock grazing and logging.

Cattle grazing and logging are the two biggest land use threats to Victoria's red gum forests. Although it is "selective" and allows for "regeneration," logging strips the forest of mature hollow-bearing red gums which provide habitat and feed to native fauna. Red gum forests support the highest number of hollow-dwelling bird species of all Victorian forest types, as well as significant numbers of hollow-dependant reptile and mammal species. Cattle compete with threatened species such as the Superb Parrot for food, destroy understorey vegetation and cause extensive erosion and pugging, particularly in sensitive wetland areas of the forest.

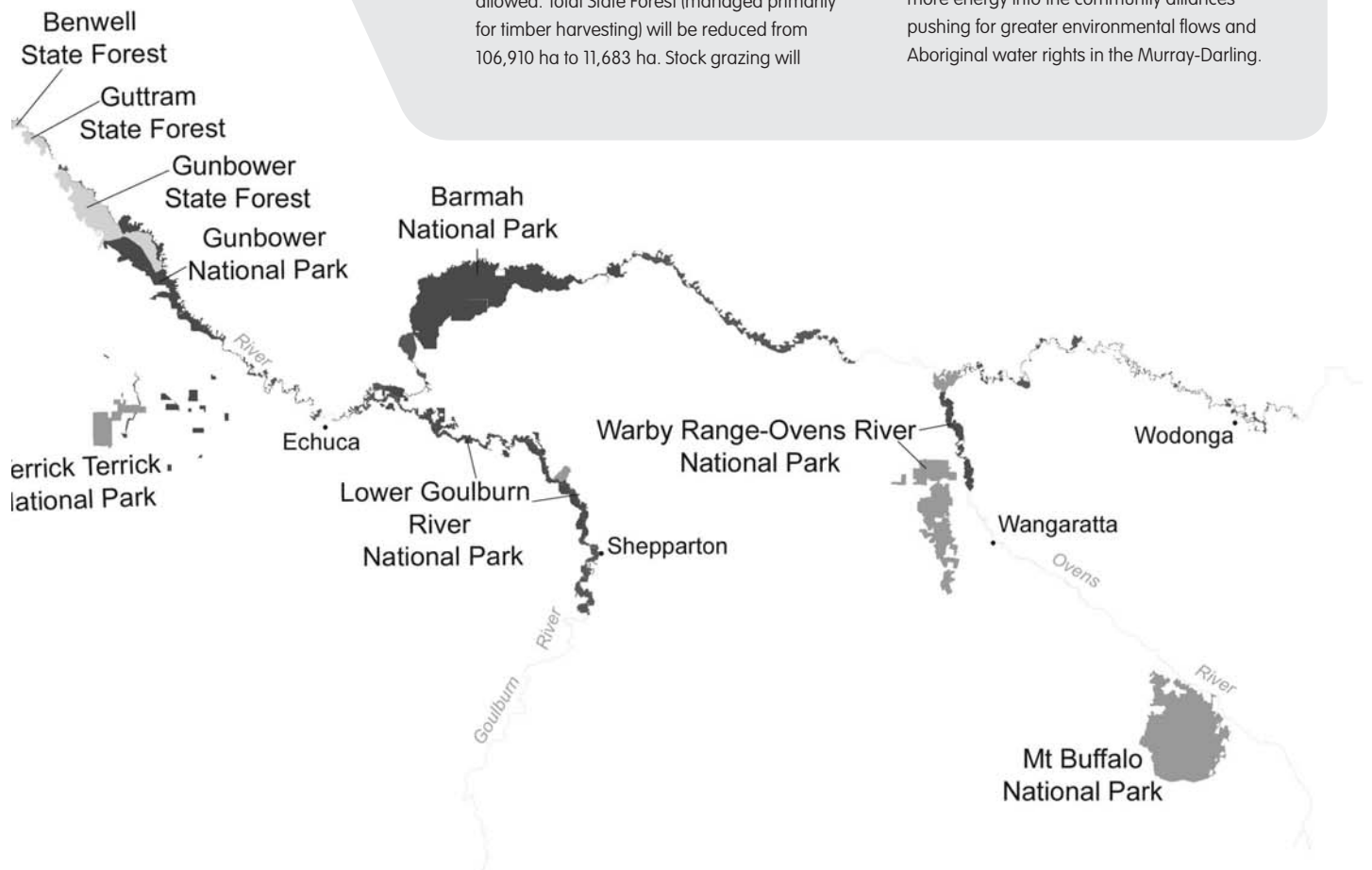
Results: Logging will be permanently banned in 90% of the areas in which it is currently allowed. Total State Forest (managed primarily for timber harvesting) will be reduced from 106,910 ha to 11,683 ha. Stock grazing will

be completely banned in all publicly owned Victorian red gum forests.

Goals: Restoration of natural flooding regimes.

Red gum ecosystems depend on regular flooding for their survival. Several of the larger forests such as Barmah and Gunbower are listed as wetlands of international significance under the Ramsar Convention. Every year millions of waterbirds from around the world descend on these forest-wetlands to breed. Floods have become increasingly rare and, when they do occur, are generally shorter and less extensive due to over-extraction of water from the Murray-Darling Basin, primarily for irrigation. Scientists estimate at least 4,000 billion litres need to be returned to the river annually to ensure the survival of red gum forests and other riverine ecosystems. So far only 500 billion litres has been committed by the state and commonwealth governments.

Results: No additional environmental water delivered through this announcement. Whilst healthy rivers and healthy red gum forests are inextricably linked, governments have historically dealt with forest conservation and environmental flows separately. We now look forward to putting more energy into the community alliances pushing for greater environmental flows and Aboriginal water rights in the Murray-Darling.





The History of the Barmah-Millewa Campaign

FoE banner - World Environment Day Rally for Victoria's Forests 2006
Photo: Josie Lee

Jonathan La Nauze

Given the historic outcomes of the Barmah-Millewa campaign, it is worth briefly examining how such an effective green-black alliance emerged in south-eastern Australia

Since European invasion, the Yorta Yorta people have maintained an unbroken campaign for land rights and the health of their country, including at least 18 separate formal claims for land and compensation. The earliest of these was in 1860, when they demanded compensation for destruction of their fisheries by paddle-steamers. From this petition, lodged with the Victorian colonial authorities, through to their most recent attempt through the gravely flawed native title system, the Yorta Yorta fight for land justice has also been a struggle for environmental justice. It should be of no surprise then that FoE – whose bedrock principle is environmental justice – was one of the organisations to which the Yorta Yorta turned for support during their ultimately rejected campaign for native title. But we were not the only group, and not the first.

When I spoke recently with Peter Barker, one of the first members of the FoE Barmah-Millewa Collective (BMC), he recalled “the readiness of the Yorta Yorta, more than any other Traditional Owner group, to work with environmentalists in a meaningful way.” Key Yorta Yorta people, particularly Monica Morgan, drove the establishment of a strategic alliance between the Yorta Yorta and environment groups in order to achieve both land justice and environmental protection of their country.

The Yorta Yorta had long had a focus on Barmah-Millewa as the ‘heartland.’ Monica says: “So if you want to protect your forest, you bring in the people who’s job that is supposed to be. But then of course that required a whole cross-cultural learning.”

In the mid 1990s, when the newly formed Goulburn Valley Environment Group (GVEG) began “making noises” about Barmah, the Yorta Yorta were both

concerned not to have been consulted, and keen to pursue a potential local ally. Monica contacted GVEG member Doug Robinson and, she says, immediately found common ground. Through participation in international fora such as the Ramsar Convention, the Yorta Yorta also began to develop relationships with larger Australian NGOs such as FoE, the Wilderness Society, and World Wide Fund for Nature. The Australian Conservation Foundation had also begun to develop a relationship with the Yorta Yorta through their work to protect the Murray River. There were challenges, however. “I was surprised by the lack of awareness of Aboriginal rights. Many of these groups seemed to operate entirely outside concepts of traditional owner culture and rights,” Monica said. FoE, thankfully, wasn’t one of them.

Discussions of a coordinated campaign to protect Barmah-Millewa began in earnest in 1998 when the Yorta Yorta occupied the Dharnya Centre in Barmah Forest as a protest against the Kennett and Howard governments’ racist “10 point plan” to water down native title legislation. Many traditional owners and supporters such as FoE attended the occupation, and new alliances and campaigns were established.

Two in particular shaped the future of FoE’s – yet to be established – Barmah-Millewa Collective. Discussions between Traditional Owners led to the formation of Murray & Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations (MLDRIN), the federation that has become a driving force in the fight to protect the cultural and ecological integrity of the Murray-Darling system. And, FoE received a formal request from Yorta Yorta elders to join them in a campaign to protect Barmah-Millewa and re-establish their rights to manage the forest.

Independently of these happenings, other conservation groups – notably the Victorian National Parks Association (VNPA) – had long been interested in establishing a

system of red gum protected areas. Victorian red gum forests were almost entirely unprotected, having missed out on even the minimal protection outcomes of a regional forest agreement. The only significant area, Barmah State Park, was a park in name only, as grazing and logging were allowed under an upper house deal secured by the National Party. The VNPA always refused to acknowledge it as a protected area.

Following the Dharnya occupation, the Yorta Yorta initiated dialogue with FoE, GVEG and the VNPA, seeking a formal campaign protocol detailing shared objectives and how the groups would work together. These discussions were challenging for some conservationists, as they were asked to commit equally to achieving majority management control and employment opportunities for the Yorta Yorta as to conservation goals such as removing logging and grazing. They felt it was unstrategic or even counter to their organisational mission to step outside the scope of pure nature conservation. To do so, it was argued, would risked damaging their credibility as it required engagement in what was seen as areas of social policy in which they had no expertise. For the Yorta Yorta, whose rights and country were daily trampled upon, this was a false separation, as social outcomes were intrinsically a consequence of environmental protection.

According to Monica, “the Elders were concerned about recovery and rejuvenation and protecting Barmah for future generations.” Issues of management control stemmed logically from that concern. Ultimately, all four groups were able to commit to the protection of the biodiversity and cultural integrity of Barmah-Millewa through joint management of a Barmah-Millewa Conservation Reserve. The Barmah-Millewa Campaign was born.

The Nyah-Vinifera Campaign

Independently, a similar collaboration had begun downstream at Nyah-Vinifera, a 1,000 ha red gum forest on Wadi Wadi country west of Swan Hill. In late 1996, a public meeting was called by local field naturalist Marg Banks to discuss a logging coupe in Nyah that the Department of Natural Resources and Environment had scheduled for the following year. Logging had been absent from Nyah for at least 20 years and the threat of its return was abhorrent to local Wadi Wadi and environmentalists. “The response was huge – about fifty people turned up, and the result was the establishment of Friends of Nyah-Vinifera (FoNV),” founding member Jacquie Kelly told me.

“Wadi Wadi people including Doug Nicholls and others had been active for years trying to protect the forest so of course they were there,” said Jacquie. “The Wadi Wadi were key to the formation of our group and it was this coming together that gave us all strength.”

I asked Doug why he and other Wadi Wadi through their lot in with local environmentalists. “Aside from them, no one was giving a stuff about our sites,” Doug told me. “That’s my grandparents and great grandparents buried out there. They’re not just sites, these are people, and in my law they’re still living.”

The group that was formed dedicated themselves to achieving community management of the forest, including Wadi Wadi and other local interests. “Wadi Wadi were just one component of the community. The Friends started as a collaboration of different cultures,” Doug said. “Everyone tries to separate us off and do deals. Wadi Wadi are part of the community and we won’t be split off.”

In 1997, in a remarkable parallel to the development of the Barmah-Millewa Campaign protocols, FoNV detailed

Intermediate Egret in breeding plumage, Hut Lake, Barmah
Photo: Sandy Scheltima copyright Australian Ecosystems



their objectives in a Community-Based Management Statement for the Nyah-Vinifera Forest. As well as dealing with key management issues such as logging, grazing, recreational access and cultural heritage protection, the statement emphasised the principle of community management: “We believe that the recognition of Native Title will be of real value to the ongoing health of the Nyah-Vinifera Forest and the River Murray as a whole. Yet whatever is achieved regarding Native Title we support the establishment of a system of community management that will include appointees from the local community having links with Koorie, Environmental and Passive Recreational Groups-.”

The fronts merge: the Red Gum Campaign

The beginning of the Victorian Environment Assessment Council (VEAC) Red Gum Investigation in 2005 created the opportunity and the imperative for FoE and other groups to work on red gum conservation at a more systemic level. The National Parks Associations on both sides of the border (VNPA and NPA) had already begun this work with the launch of the cross-border Red Gum Icons Project the year before.

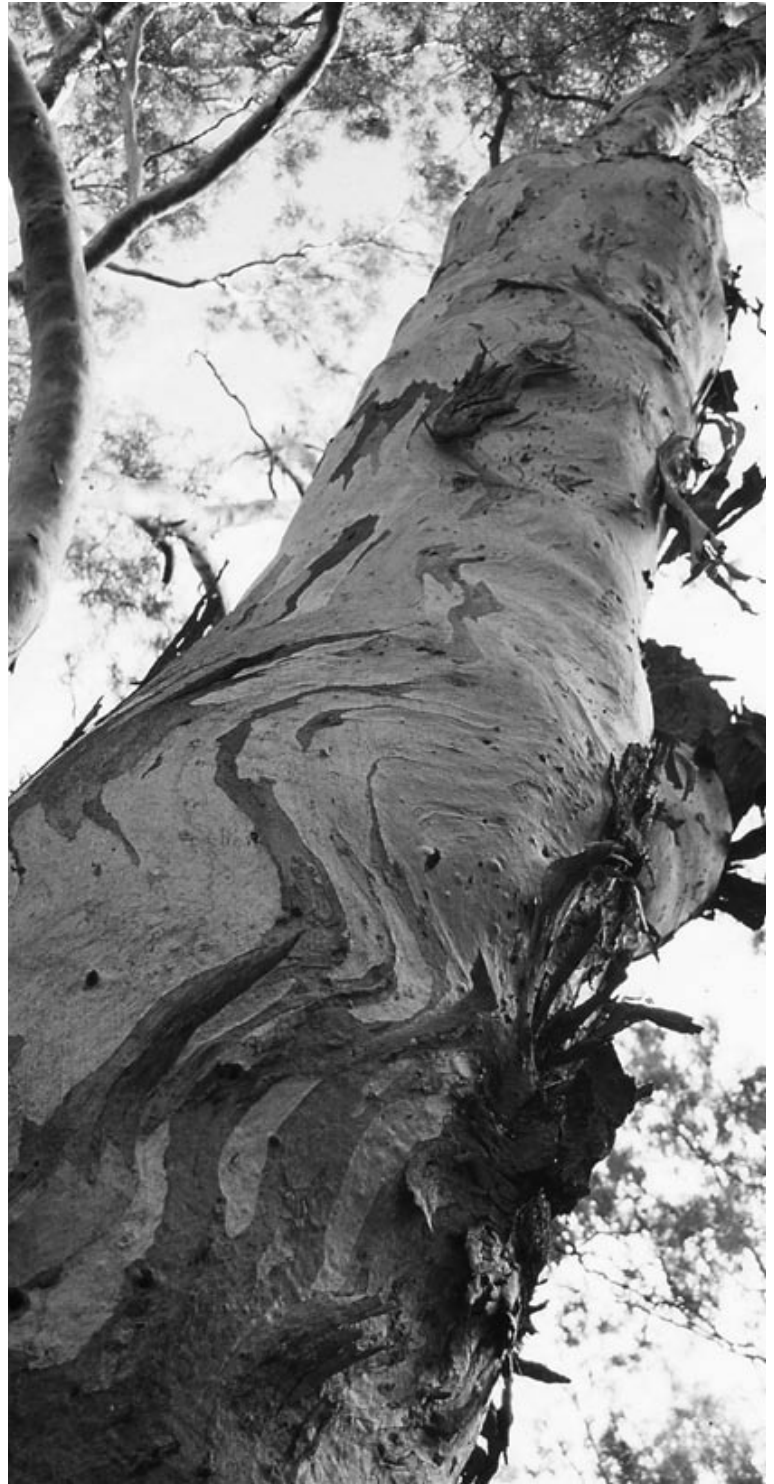
Although we had successfully campaigned for VEAC to investigate Aboriginal joint management options, FoE had yet to establish formal relationships with the other Traditional Owners along the Murray. FoE saw this as a priority and hence a relationship was formed with MLDRIN who were also keen to collaborate. After signing an historic Cooperation Agreement in February 2007, MLDRIN, FoE, The Wilderness Society and NPA began a comprehensive consultation and negotiation over red gum forests with individual Traditional Owner Nations. This process, and the resulting Murray Country Project, are explored in this issue of Chain Reaction by long-term Barmah-Millewa Campaign member and now Murray Country Project coordinator, Indira Narayan.

Successful green-black campaigns are a long time in the development, however, and within the rigid timeframe of the VEAC investigation, it proved impossible to replicate the Yorta Yorta and Wadi Wadi alliances which had developed over many years. Strong relationships have developed with the Barapa Barapa, Mutti Mutti and Wamba Wamba people, and tentative bridges have been built with the Latji Latji and Wiradjuri – however agreed positions on conservation proposals mostly arrived too late to influence the VEAC recommendations. It is telling that out of the huge VEAC investigation area, Barmah and Nyah-Vinifera ended up with the strongest outcomes for both conservation and justice for Aboriginal people.

The campaign does not end with the recent announcement, and FoE remains committed to working in solidarity with the Traditional Owners of the Murray-

Darling to protect country and achieve land justice. On the Victorian side of the border, this includes a jointly managed National Park covering the Gunbower Forest. The NSW government has been slow to act, which has the singular advantage that if and when it does conduct a regional assessment, green-black relationships will be more widespread than they were in Victoria. Through the Murray Country Project, FoE, NPA and the Wilderness Society have been developing solid relationships and agreed proposals with Traditional Owners and we look forward to making a renewed effort in support of the NSW red gum campaign.

Photo: Brian Bainbridge



Campaign timeline

1982 – 1985	Victoria's Land Conservation Council conducts a Murray Valley Area Investigation. The National Party waters down the already limited conservation proposals in the upper house to the extent that logging and grazing is permitted in the new Barmah State Park. The Victorian National Parks Association (VNPA) refuse to recognise the new park.
1990	Goulburn Valley Environment Group (GVEG) formed.
1994	Yorta Yorta request meeting with GVEG and the beginnings of an alliance emerge.
1996	Friends of Nyah Vinifera Forest (FoNV) formed including membership of key Wadi Wadi individuals.
1997	FoNV write the 'Community-Based Management Statement for the Nyah-Vinifera Forest'.
1998	Yorta Yorta occupy the Dharnya Centre. Environmental activists and Traditional Owners travel from the Friends of the Earth Indigenous Solidarity Conference to support them.
2000	Yorta Yorta, FoE and GVEG agree on Barmah-Millewa campaign protocol.
2002	<p>FoE and Yorta Yorta hold a press conference at the Dharnya Centre to launch the Barmah-Millewa campaign.</p> <p>FoE and Yorta Yorta organise the Barmah-Millewa Summit at the Dharnya Centre. Peak environment and social justice organisations endorse campaign for joint management of Barmah-Millewa.</p> <p>Bracks Labor government makes election promise to conduct an investigation into establishing new red gum national parks.</p> <p>VNPA reaches agreement with the Yorta Yorta on shared campaign objectives.</p>
2005	<p>Victorian Environment Assessment Council (VEAC) River Red Gum Investigation commences. After a concerted campaign, the terms of reference include consideration of Aboriginal joint management models – a Victorian first.</p> <p>Protected habitat logged in the Barmah Forest. Sustained protest by FoE, VNPA and Yorta Yorta leads to an external investigation by the Environment Protection Authority. It is found that the Department of Sustainability and Environment sent logging contractors into a protected area for the nationally threatened Superb Parrot.</p>
2006	Red gum forests clear-felled on the Murray River including one 200 m by 120 m, only metres from the banks of the Murray near Tooleybuc, in NSW.
2007	<p>Seven environment groups sign a Cooperation Agreement with MLDRIN, forming an alliance for the protection of the ecological and cultural integrity of the Murray and Lower Darling Rivers systems.</p> <p>NPA NSW take Forests NSW to court but logging continues in threatened species habitats. A community blockade ensues in Millewa forest, halting logging for five days. The blockade ends when Forests NSW and NPA reach an out-of-court settlement under which restrictions are put on logging until the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement.</p> <p>Environment groups begin negotiations over red gum forests with Traditional Owners in the Murray-Darling.</p>
2008	<p>Victorian Environment Assessment Council recommend 103,600 ha of new and expanded conservation reserves to protect red gum forests, as well as co-management of Nyah-Vinifera and Barmah.</p> <p>Victorian government accepts most of the recommendations, committing to a massive 91,000 ha increase in the red gum reserve system, and co-management of Nyah-Vinifera and Barmah forests.</p>



Blockade in the Moira red gum forest NSW, September 2007

River Red Gum Forests: The Situation in NSW

Georgina Woods

The NSW Labor government was once a conservation trailblazer. During the 1990s, forest management in eastern NSW was totally overhauled and in subsequent years millions of hectares of national parks were created as we inched our way towards National Forest Policy targets for ecosystem protection in the escarpment and coastal forests and into the north-west.

One major forest district was left behind as this reform process petered out, leaving undetermined the fate of the river red gum forests that cluster around the major floodplains and waterways of the Riverina bioregion – the Murray, the Lachlan, and the Murrumbidgee.

Unlike all the other major NSW forestry districts, the river red gums have never been subject to a regional assessment process, and do not enjoy the benefits of an Integrated Forestry Operations Approval. This neglect has driven both the NSW red gums ecosystems and the industry that exploits them into the ground. Hollow-bearing and mature trees are in decline, iconic species that once thrived there are vanishing. The combined impact

of the drought, over-allocated rivers and an unsustainable and destructive logging regime is killing the river red gum forests.

The red gum timber industry crosses the state boundary, just like the ecosystems themselves and the Aboriginal nations that have continuously occupied them for millennia. Victorian-based mills process trees cut in NSW. Even before the Victorian government's outstanding decision, NSW forests provided five times the volume of timber compared to Victoria, from only 1.5 times the forest area. Victoria's recent commitment to remove 90% of its red gum state forests from production means that NSW forests will be under even more pressure to supply timber mill quotas. The spotlight has now fallen squarely on the NSW government to assess and protect the NSW red gum forests.

The NSW government is heading into the second half of this term with a serious environmental deficit. Promised greenhouse reduction initiatives have failed to materialise, planning laws still allow widespread habitat

loss, and the marine park creation process has stalled. No major new environmental initiatives have emerged. The creation of large new national parks in red gum country would indicate that the government has not abandoned the natural world and is serious about addressing major conservation shortfalls.

The National Parks Association of NSW and other environment groups are calling for the creation of large new national parks in the public forests of the river red gums, under joint management with Aboriginal Nations where that is sought. The area of forest protected will have to be substantial to meet basic conservation targets, and the volume of timber extracted from the forests dramatically reduced.

The NSW red gums harbour areas of national environmental significance including over 80,000 ha of Ramsar-listed wetlands and habitat for the nationally threatened Superb Parrot. Logging activity has long been recognised as having a significant impact on the environment – particularly for hollow-dependent species like the Superb Parrot – yet the logging has never been granted approval and has never even been assessed under the federal Environment Protection Biodiversity Conservation Act. Last year, the National Parks Association of NSW submitted a major report to the federal government alleging that forestry activities undertaken by Forests NSW are illegal under the Act and calling for the environment minister Peter Garrett to halt logging until a proper assessment and approval process is complete, national parks declared, threatened species and wetlands properly protected and logging quotas reduced.

The needless delay of the NSW government in initiating a process to assess the forests and protect them in large new national parks has already cost the red gums dearly. A process must begin now that assesses the ecological significance of the forests, including their role as climate refuges in the only vegetated east-west corridor in south-west NSW. That process must engage Traditional Owner nations on an informed consent basis so that the aspirations of Aboriginal people, who have never ceded sovereignty over their country, can form part of the forest reform process.

Georgina Woods is a Biodiversity Protection Officer with the National Parks Association of NSW.

Peron's Tree Frog - *Litoria peroni* group at Reedy Lagoon Gunbower Island
Photo: Damien Cook



The Murray Country Project

Indira Narayan

A really exciting collaboration is happening in the southern Murray Darling Basin - a coming together of Traditional Owners and environment groups, determined to make significant sustainable changes to the way we live in and use this region. It is a multifaceted plan concerning the myriad of problems faced in the river country. The alliance is a recognition of the self-determination rights of Traditional Owners and the cultural knowledge that they have regarding their country, the expertise of environment NGOs, and an acknowledgement that working together is integral to a sustainable future.

We often hear about blackfellas working on country in the top end and the centre, but until recently it was a concept hardly considered by non-indigenous groups in the south-east of Australia. Blackfellas in the south-east have always looked after or sorrowed over their country, and have never stopped calling for the protection of country. Having survived measles and being locked into missions, indigenous nations of the Murray Darling continue the strong and proud carriage of their old people. They're demanding recognition of their rights to control resources on their country in order to satisfy their traditional cultural responsibilities as well as their contemporary socio-economic needs. This stoicism in the face of adversity is beginning to pay off for Traditional Owners, with a slow transition in attitude and behaviour ethics amongst greenies and other institutions.

Colonialism in the south-east has profoundly affected Traditional Owners and their country, with Victoria and southern NSW being the most heavily urbanised, farmed and industrialised part of Australia. This scenario has damned Traditional Owners. It's why Traditional Owners haven't enjoyed joint management rights in Victoria's parks, where this has been an option in some other states and territories for years. Theft of Aboriginal people's land and water has left only 0.02% of tenure in Aboriginal hands within the Basin. Intensive privatisation of lands, farming, water use, logging and other extractive activities have meant that we're all left scrambling to control activities on remaining 'Crown Lands'. Unfortunately that has seen distrust build up between Aboriginal communities and green groups.

Aboriginal people are marginalised by racist attitudes and prejudices, and at the same time in this corner of the country, are combatting both naïve and purposeful accusations of not being black enough to enjoy real rights over country. This Daisy Bates mentality of the "dying out of the Aborigine" permeates the green movement. For too long, with some exceptions, environmental NGOs, along

with other institutions and communities, have disregarded Traditional Owners rights, and have presumptively worked on conservation issues and excluded the participation of blackfellas in the south-east.

Greenies demand a voice at the negotiating table and in the media over Crown lands. Though our voices are relatively loud, more often than not we have not made room for Traditional Owners to sit alongside us to have their voices heard also. As an empowered part of the general community (our ranks are over-populated by middle class, highly educated white people), our alliance building with blackfellas has been too slow. There has been obstinate racism that is coddled in our ranks. Cries that 'our board or our membership will not allow us to recognise sovereignty of Traditional Owners' are not uncommon. This has translated into a lack of solidarity with Traditional Owners to shuffle the seats to allow them to join us at the negotiating table or at the media interview.

Having said all that, over the past decade there has been a significant shift in attitude in certain parts of the community, including the green movement. Environmental activists are slowly undergoing a forced decolonisation of our attitudes to our natural landscapes and our understanding of Aboriginal people's place in country. But this natural alliance needs to be nurtured through a period of relationship building and understanding the complex roles that we play, and places we occupy in both the greenie and blackfella worlds. It needs to be cemented with a show of solidarity that greenies are not in it just at the times that suit us but for the long haul.

Unfortunately, not all environmental NGOs are at the table yet and those that have begun the journey are still challenged by racist, colonial policies. It can be an unsettling process – giving up power, especially for environmental NGOs, who rarely have the clout that corporate entities or governments have. Though it is often cash strapped, the environment movement is empowered with lots of university education, access to philanthropy, communication and media skills. It is populated by those that have chosen to be there rather than those that are born into multi-generational poverty and displacement.

The Murray Country Project, while focused on the nuts and bolts of protecting remaining red gums and water left in the river country, is dealing with these issues of power and control. The Cooperation Agreement between nine Traditional Owner Nations and seven environmental NGOs is being studied with interest by signatories as well

as groups around the country. Hopefully this Alliance and Project contributes to sustainable pathways - and not just in this part of the country.

The Cooperation Agreement

In February 2007, seven environment groups with a working interest in the Murray Darling Basin signed a historic Cooperative Agreement with the confederated members of the Murray and Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations (MLDRIN). This Agreement recognises the self-determination rights of Traditional Owners, and a promise to work together towards a shared vision of healthy country and healthy people. It means changing past practices where environment groups waltz in and start demanding the establishment of parks, or for that matter that all logging is stopped. It recognises that Traditional Owners are often at the coalface of environmental problems and solutions. The agreed process includes NGO's talking with local Traditional Owners about priorities and strategies. Participatory discussions are organised to ensure that local Traditional Owners are included in decision-making and that there is adequate time and space for effective and principled negotiation - this process is known as free, prior and informed consent.

The aims of the Cooperative Agreement include working together towards:

- healthy country, where Traditional Owners can care for country according to their traditions and customs;
- healthy rivers and streams flowing with natural cycles and cultural flows;
- the restoration of important cultural and ecological connections, providing a secure future for traditional culture, native flora and fauna; and
- a prosperous economy reliant on environmentally sensitive industries that conserve natural and cultural values.

The Murray Country Project: People, Land and Water

A few months after the agreement was reached, three NGOs and MLDRIN birthed the Murray Country Project (MCP) in order to negotiate conservation goals regarding red gums in northern Victoria and southern NSW. This was particularly urgent in light of the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council's investigation into the management of red gum ecosystems on Victorian public lands. The flogging of red gum forests in NSW also necessitated quick action.

These red gum discussions included talking about land and water tenure, and negotiating priority areas for campaigns, investigating what skills and knowledge in whitefella science Traditional Owners needed and what traditional knowledge of water flows and biodiversity Traditional Owners could share with greenies and others. In practical terms this meant discussing for example whether we campaign for a jointly managed National Park or an Indigenous Protected Area. MCP partners have also identified priority areas for future collaboration.

Agreements have been made between the three NGOs and three of the nations, with a further two pending, covering the majority of the red gum areas in question. When including NGO agreements with Yorta Yorta, we have unified our actions to see the creation of significant new jointly managed national parks and Indigenous Protected Areas, as well as a range of complementary socio-economic programs.

Since the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council's recommendations have been accepted by the government, we are continuing our joint work to develop effective and empowering joint management models.

Signatories to the 2007 Cooperation Agreement

(*Active Murray Country Project partners to date)

Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations (MLDRIN)

Wiradjuri*
Yorta Yorta
Taungurung
Barapa Barapa*
Wamba Wamba*
Mutti Mutti*
Wadi Wadi*
Werigaia
Ngarrindjeri

NGOs

Australian Conservation Foundation
Environment Victoria
Friends of the Earth*
National Parks Association of NSW*
Nature Conservation Council of NSW
Victorian National Parks Association; and
The Wilderness Society, Victoria*, Sydney*, SA.

Strategies for the future

The project partners want to see the victories south of the Murray replicated in NSW. This includes looking at improving joint management arrangements that are currently available in NSW, so that they better address Traditional Owner participation in decision-making and participation in natural resource management.

We are also workshopping with various environment and legal/human rights NGOs about Aboriginal rights over water. This work hopes to co-mingle more effectively a rights agenda in water campaigns, and incorporate MLDRIN's calls for cultural water allocations. Water campaigners have been able to listen to what Traditional Owners are saying about cultural water and jigsawing it into place with environmental watering campaigns.

This year we look forward to developing a strategy for the next five years of work of advocacy and public education. The strategy will include protocols for engagement and goals for a myriad of campaigns like cultural water flows, organising training opportunities for Traditional Owners in Natural Resource Management methodologies, and incorporating traditional cultural knowledge into management plans for red gum wetlands and other ecosystems, monitoring significant species and biodiversity in environments affected by human use and climate change, planning and implementing adaptation strategies for climate change, general capacity building in the small and regional areas that are the homes for Traditional Owners and other rural communities, and land and water acquisition by Traditional Owners.

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World Environment Day Rally for Victoria's Forests.
Photo: Josie Lee