

Caring for Water on Country in South West Queensland

Far South West Aboriginal Natural Resource
Management Group



South West NRM

*Achieving sustainable landscapes
for rural communities*

South West Natural Resource Management

The River People

“All of our history is tied up in these watersheds. Our family history and our social history. When the landscape is fundamentally changed – it is the cultural landscape and not just the natural landscape - then the history of that landscape can’t be remembered. The persons. The things. The information is not there to give to the kids. You need these places to be intact so we can still go there and teach the kids. Tell them the stories. The stories never change and that is how everything is passed along. The stories never change but if you change the landscape you are starting to change the stories. The interconnectivity between the watersheds – the stories go across country and different mobs and in your country you carry that story with you. You can take it to your neighbours and they carry it and it goes through country”.

Contents

Background

- South West NRM and Far South West Aboriginal NRM Group.....4

Background

- Caring for Water on Country in South West Queensland Workshop.....4

Statement of Sovereignty.....4

Position Statement.....5

Introducing the River People.....5

The River People and the Connectivity Concept.....6

The Way Forward.....7

Stories of Water on Country in South West Queensland.....11

About This Report.....14

Background – South West NRM and Far South West Aboriginal NRM Group

South West Natural Resource Management Limited (South West NRM) is the designated regional body responsible for developing and coordinating the management of natural resources in south west Queensland. This organization recognizes the important role that Traditional Owners have in managing natural resources and cultural heritage assets and works closely with Aboriginal communities across the region. Since 2004, South West NRM has facilitated, hosted and assisted with the ongoing work of the Far South West Aboriginal Natural Resource Management Group (FSWANRMG). This group comprises two representatives (a man and woman) from each of the six Traditional Owners groups in the region. The Nations which make up the FSWANRMG are the Kooma, Budjiti, Bidjara, Mardigan, Kullilli and Kunja.

Background – Caring for Water on Country in South West Queensland Workshop.

Traditional Owners from south west Queensland were invited to provide input into the Bioregional Assessment Project (Phase 1) that South West NRM had been commissioned to do for the Australian Government. On Friday 10th August 2012, 19 Traditional Owners from the Kooma, Budjiti, Mardigan, Kullilli and Kunja Nations as well as Traditional Owners from neighbouring Nations of Murrawarri and Boonthamurra attended a workshop at the Bidjara Conference Room at Edward Street in Charleville. Traditional Owners were invited to provide input in regard to the cultural and spiritual values associated with ground and surface water in south west Queensland and to examine the potential impacts which coal seam gas or coal mining developments might have on these water sites; what sites might need to be protected and how this protection might be implemented.

Statement of Sovereignty

The information in this report has been provided willingly by the Traditional Owners associated with the Far South West Aboriginal Natural Resource Management Group on the assumption that they are not relinquishing or acquiescing any sovereign rights or interests over their country in south west Queensland. The information shared in this document remains the property of the people who kindly contributed this knowledge.

Position Statement

“Those things have been here for thousands of years now and we are not going to destroy them. We will look after them, you know”.

The Far South West Aboriginal Natural Resource Management Group representatives who attended the workshop clearly and overtly believe that any mining activity on their traditional lands in south west Queensland is not welcomed or encouraged. There was a strong belief that mining activity and the associated development is not compatible with their traditional values. Traditional owners in this area have a strong cultural, spiritual and physical connection to country. The natural environment is not only a physical space for the Aboriginal people but also the home to both the cultural environment and spiritual environment and it all needs to be protected. To disturb the landscape in any manner disrupts this close connection to the cultural, spiritual and physical environment. *“We need spiritual protection because our ancestors created beings and also the soil, flora, fauna and water and the protection of our cultural heritage sites is also needed as this is home to our stories and our objects and our artifacts within that landscape”.* It is for these inter-related connectivity reasons that mining development is not compatible with core Aboriginal values.

Introducing the River People

“The creeks and gullies are our arteries and water is our blood and without that blood which is the water we are stuffed. We want the lot of them protected, not just the rivers”.

The south west Queensland traditional owners are known as ‘River People’. Other Aboriginal groups strongly identify with deserts (desert people) and the coast (coastal people). However, the entire history of the River People in both the recent past (last 200 years) as well as the ancient past (over many millennia) have demonstrated a strong connection to the watersheds. *“Our people living on these watersheds owned 100% of the resources including the water and the plants and the animals that were there and those foods were feeding our mob and those wallabies were for our people and all that food and water and bush medicine - they were all to sustain the mob in that particular watershed and they were our resources”.*

The key types of water sites (listed in no particular order) that were important to the Traditional Owners were:

- Natural springs
- Water holes
- Lakes

- Rivers
- Wetlands
- Bores and the artesian basin
- Underground rivers
- The flow of surface water
- Native wells
- Native springs
- Gilgais
- Ephemeral claypans.

The River People and the Connectivity Concept

“Water is the lifeblood”.

South west Queensland River People are immensely proud of their ability over many thousands of years to maintain their connection to the land and in particular, the water. Aboriginal people have a holistic view of their land that contrasts with the western perspectives of dissecting whole concepts into parts. *“The sum total of all of the components that makes things whole is what makes it sacred and rivers are the veins and you can’t protect the veins in the hand and forget the rest of the body, as the rest of the body will die. We talk about interconnectivity and it is like the whole rivers are the veins flowing through the body and you can’t protect one bit of the body without protecting the whole body. Cancer in one part of the body kills the whole body and if you think of mining as being like a cancer, then this mining cancer has the capacity to bring down the whole watershed”.*

Aboriginal people believe that water not only sustains the people, but is an integral and vital part of the landscape and that there needs to be a high cultural value placed on the entire landscape. *“As custodians we do not have much choice other than to follow suit as your ancestors did and you have to protect the environment and if you stop doing this you are not fulfilling your obligations to your people and your country and your cultural heritage and that is why we are saying we want holistic protection. We have an obligation to do this”.* Every water site located in the landscape was considered as being special to Aboriginal people, and it was not possible to prioritise or select some water sites as having a higher value than others.

Additionally, there is a strong belief that one water site (e.g. natural springs, waterholes, rivers etc) is always connected to another water site. This applies to water sites that are physically

close to each other (i.e. in close proximity) as well as those water sites that are many hundreds of kilometers away. There was also a reluctance to state the significance of one water site (e.g. a waterhole) and ignore the connectivity of the surrounding landscape, flora and fauna to that waterhole. The connectivity in the landscape is a key factor that cannot be ignored by Aboriginal people.

The River People believe they have an enormous responsibility to care for their country and to protect all water sites. This is based on their strong belief that they are the current custodians of the land and that this is a responsibility they have inherited from their ancestors. In turn, the River People need to hand this country on to their descendants with spiritual, physical and cultural values intact. *“We are the custodians of the country and as much as we love and value each other’s country, what your role is, is that you are custodians of your inherited country that belong to your descendants and you are only a custodian of it while you are alive and you have an obligation to look after it under your customs and traditions of your people. You love and value your country and we all have individual custodial responsibilities to the landscapes that we came from and that we descended from”.*

Spiritual connections to water sites were also very prevalent. *“The interconnectivity between the various watersheds – these stories go across country and to different mobs and in your country you carry that story and you take it to your neighbor and they carry it. It goes through the country”.* Frequently referenced was the water spirit who freely travels around the country side in the underground rivers. There needs to be sufficient water for this spirit to live and travel to the numerous water sites that make up the catchments in south west Queensland. *“If the gas people put one of these huge pipes in the ground and it goes through one of these underground rivers then this stops the connectivity between that water hole and the spring and that river. Therefore interrupting the spirits pathway. The pathways need to be uninterrupted so he can get through”.*

This spiritual and cultural connection also encompasses different meanings for both males and females. Whilst water is equally significant to both sexes, there are protocols determined by Aboriginal law which determined how water sites were used. As current custodians of the land, the River People have a strong responsibility to honour these protocols.

The Way Forward

“The rivers are veins going through your body. You can’t cut cancer off your body. Well – cancer is the coal seam gas”.

The Far South West Aboriginal Natural Resource Management Group Aboriginal people acknowledge that whilst they do not support mining development, the reality is that expanded mining development is a very real possibility. The group has suggested a number of important protective mechanisms, which should be implemented immediately and in an ongoing manner over time, if the impacts of mining on country are to be minimized.

The protective mechanisms include:

- Water monitoring and benchmarking program
- Future development assessments / approvals
- ‘On Country’ team
- Capturing the River People’s knowledge and connectivity

Water Monitoring and Benchmarking Program

“Proper paperwork to record the sites and this needs to be part of the whole process. This starts pre-exploration”.

The group has suggested the following protection plan. The first step in preparing for protecting water resources is to immediately commence regular water monitoring of existing water sites, both surface and underground. This monitoring should use standard scientific water monitoring techniques as well as accessing traditional ecological knowledge (which is often held by the old people) to inform monitoring. The River People believe this should be undertaken by Aboriginal people who would work with all landholders (both mining and non mining) in their respective traditional owner areas. The operating costs of these permanent monitoring programs should be funded by those who use the land for commercial gain. The water monitoring personnel would be employed by a non-aligned / non-government group. The group nominated South West NRM as an appropriate group. The results of this monitoring should be recorded in a benchmarking format and shared with Traditional Owners groups, as well as the wider community.

Aboriginal people believe that existing databases (e.g. Cultural Heritage) and other written documents hold information about the locations of these water sites and that these should be the starting base for this monitoring programme.

Future Development Assessments / Approvals

“We need to be in the conversations”.

Any future development applications would need to be approved by each Traditional Owner group in accordance with their custodian responsibilities to country and would form a key part of the government approval process. Mining development work is not to go ahead unless it has been approved by the relevant Traditional Owner group on whose country the development is proposed. *“It is a custodian responsibility for our country and inputting into whatever planning processes are taking place on the basis that we are custodians of our country”.* This would work in a manner similar to the current Indigenous Land Use Agreement (ILUA) process and would place a high priority on water site protection. *“We need to get them to the table. Get them to our table here or wherever and tell them what we treasure most and these are on Aboriginal country and we don’t want them upsetting it”.* Archaeologists (selected by the Traditional Owner group) would also be brought in to ensure cultural heritage sites are assessed and recorded accurately. This would ensure that River People have the opportunity to ensure that development work undertaken is compatible with traditional owner spiritual, physical and cultural values.

In the case of mining development applications, close attention would be paid to assessing the surface water and the underground connectivity. Detailed checklists need to be developed to ensure assessments undertaken are thorough. Written reports would be generated by the Traditional Owner assessors and shared with the group and the developer, and will form the basis of any agreements. Once this work is undertaken, dialogue and negotiations between the Traditional Owners and the developer commences. *“Just talk to the miners and then the two groups together can sort it out. We can talk it out. It is hard but we can do it”.* If development is approved, there will be a clear direction given to the developer to ensure work is undertaken in a manner agreeable to the Traditional Owner custodians. The future development assessment and approvals process would be fully funded by the developer proposing development.

On Country Team

“Those things have been here for thousands of years now and we are not going to destroy them. We will look after them, you know”.

Supporting this monitoring program should be a strong support team working ‘on country’ to ground truth and observe any current development work happening. This ‘on country’ team would have a key role in observing development and general operational work to ensure it is occurring in a manner which protects water resources and the general landscape. The operating costs of the permanent ‘on country’ team should be funded by those who use the land.

Capturing the River People’s Knowledge and Connectivity

“The Kooma were taken off country and we are slowly finding out and building it up and it is taking a long time. The old people – I am finding it very hard to find the old people”.

Many River People expressed concerns that not all of the spiritual, ecological and cultural connectivity of their people to the country is being shared and passed onto younger generations. Existing cultural heritage databases were considered to be adequate; however there was a need to go beyond this recorded information. *“The biggest thing with connectivity is to ensure there is cultural transmission. We can be connected to different groups and we are all associated with water and we need to have cultural transmission to the next generation to ensure that they get this information and that it stays there. We also need this connectivity between all the mobs”.*

Many elders possess traditional knowledge that has not been formally mapped or captured in a database due to the private and sensitive nature of this knowledge. There was a strong view that assistance needs to be provided to allow River People to meet, talk and share knowledge which relates to their traditional spiritual, physical and cultural lives.

“We need to talk to Aunty from country and to learn something – our neighboring elders might shed light on something that makes you understand your own country a bit better because they have a kinship connection with family and they can take you out and show you the sites”. The River People need assistance in facilitating this connection, as this is seen as an essential part of building powerful connections to country and ensuring real protection of country results. It was felt that past processes (e.g. native title) have segregated Traditional Owner groups when historically the groups were very connected. It was believed that a key part of being able to protect assets is ensuring that the knowledge about the connectivity to country is adequately

transmitted to the next generation of custodians. The capturing of this knowledge would be a giant step forward in empowering River People to make thoughtful decisions about protecting the land and wisely developing country.

Stories of Water on Country in South West Queensland

“Every water hole has a story and every spring and everything to do with water is special to our people. We cannot say one waterhole as it is the whole lot that need protecting. Every one of those is important to us”.

The River People of south west Queensland were extremely reluctant to identify sites and tell stories of particular water sites that outline and illustrate the cultural, physical and spiritual values. *“You can’t divorce one thing from the other – they are all part of one”.* *“The whole place – every story – if you take one part out of it, you lose the whole story”.* Water is considered an integral part of the landscape as it sustains all life, and is important culturally and spiritually. There was an extreme reluctance to nominate sites or to say why one water site might be more important than another water site. *“All the way down the Nebine and the Caiwarro and all those little lakes and all those little gilgais sustained us as a people for a long long time and then all of a sudden someone comes in and we have to justify by saying this place is important to us and this one over here is important to us. Then someone white comes along and says ‘this one is the most important’ and it is one half of an acre and ‘I don’t care about what is near it’ - yet we have connections to many lakes and they are important”.* It was this connectivity between sites that makes River People extremely reluctant to nominate sites and name them as being important.

Additionally, there were some locations where Traditional Owners did not want people visiting. Culturally, it is not appropriate to talk about these sites or to name the location. If the Aboriginal people had to name specific locations, only the sites known to everyone would be nominated, and many (and possibly more significant) sites would not be nominated. It is for these reasons that the River People would like to nominate the entire south west Queensland area as being culturally, physically and spiritually important and deserving of protection.

The Aboriginal Traditional Owners of south west Queensland were happy to share a number of generic anecdotal stories which illustrate the potential importance and connectiveness of water sites. These stories have been captured using the words of the River People, and demonstrate the strong cultural, physical and spiritual connections that exist.

Cultural Connection

“One of the most important to me is the Warrego River and any tributaries because my father and uncles were all born down there and came from there and all the way down to the border and over to the Moonjaree Creek. The stories are important and they come from teaching sites that are important and we now have to do the teaching and how they came about. We teach them how they came about and I think in whatever form water takes it is part of the natural world. It is our history and what we teach. Everyone must know this history in their own way”.

“We used to have rainmakers who used to dance the rain. They use to dance the rain always and in the 60s and 70s and they died in the 1980s – and we had the biggest drought. When they used to sing the river – from the Murray River to the Murray mouth we had record floods. These things need to be taken into consideration when we talk about water. There were times when we had to sing the water and that is our connectivity with the spirit and we talk to the old fellows up beyond. When we talk about protection, it is not just stones and bones as the heritage that needs protecting”.

Spiritual Connection

On the Paroo River there is the Caiwarro waterhole. This is a resting place for an ancestral being called the N and is the waterhole where he travelled. The waterhole is named Caiwarro and it comes from the word for yellowbelly and is a real good yellowbelly water hole and this is our food. This is of natural and cultural heritage significance and we would not want anything impacting on this significant site because of its link back to the Paroo River and in its own right it’s a breeding ground for fish and a ceremonial ground. The whole watershed is important”.

“There is a belief that those creative beings that created the Paroo River live in that waterhole and our ancestors for millennia have lived in that watershed and have died in that watershed. Our spirit beings inhabit that watershed and they live within that landscape. Therefore to disturb the landscape is to disturb the spirit ancestors of our people. To disturb the river is to disturb the creative beings of our people. The natural and spiritual works are connected and our culture and our law and our customs are about understanding the connections between these worlds”.

“The water spirit lives on Kooma country and in the Darling River and the Paroo River and Widgegoara Creek and it is all interconnected. We need everyone’s help to protect him. They [miners] will come over and disturb our spirit here. The water spirit is the most sacred spirit we have in regard to the water and if you interrupt that spirit then you interrupt our life and it has consequences”.

Physical Connection

“The river runs from up here and runs all the way down and I guarantee that there are marks all the way along that river. I walked 15-20 kms and there are markings on the rocks and waterholes and they are on both sides. There are drawings and fish traps where the rocks are across the river and all they had to do was tip it out when the water was going down and they let the water out and then they walked in and got the fish and it is pretty clever when you look at it. The fish traps on the river are very important to the old people. They are still there and they are sacred to us. They are right throughout our land”.

“Throughout all of our land there are always rock wells, which our ancestors dug, and that is how they travelled through the land. If they did not have them with water in them, they would have died. It is right throughout all of our land and not just in one part. There was also women’s business and men’s business and some rock wells were for women’s business and some for men’s business”.

“In some places the rock wells are filled in and they are not clean and they are all over the place and we need the whole lot because it is very valuable to us”.

“The wells have dried up right across our country and they are important to the neighbouring tribe as they are to our people and there are rivers and the stock routes or the walking places and these are important to us as they were our places of travel and this is how we travelled through each other’s country and that is why we want the whole map [protected] because that person’s waterhole is a important as the next person’s because they walk in our country”.

“One of my special places is a Mardigan place. It is funny how other people’s places can become important to you as well. It does not matter if this is – those waterholes are just as special to him as they are to us people, I know that for a fact. Beautiful waterholes in places that are special to me as well. We all interconnect”.

“There is one particular tree that is most sacred and that is the Red River Gum. The ancestors will go down to the rivers and the lakes and talk to our ancestors and talk to them through the leaves of the Red River Gum and the ancestor would talk back to them through the leaves of the red river gum”.

About This Report

Karen Tully from Mulga Solutions was engaged by South West NRM to facilitate the workshop with the Traditional Owners from the Kooma, Budjiti, Mardigan, Kullilli and Kunja Nations, as well as traditional owners from the neighbouring Nations of Murrwarri and Boonthamurra. At this workshop, Traditional Owners were invited to provide input in regard to the cultural and spiritual values associated with ground and surface water in south west Queensland and to examine the potential impacts coal seam gas or coal mining developments might have on these water sites; what sites might need to be protected and how this protection might be implemented.

This report captures the valuable feedback and input gained during the workshop. This report also features actual quotes from the workshop participants and these are written in italics and inserted throughout the text. The quotes add an authentic richness to the report as they vividly reflect and capture key thoughts and opinions from the River People.