

Voices of the Barka won't be forgotten

COMMENT

Quentin Grafton and the Water Justice Hub

THE key theme of this year's World Rivers Day, on September 26, was the importance of clean, fresh water for everyone - a global goal that, sadly, remains unrealised. Delivering "water and sanitation for all" does not only mean adequate water treatment, before and after water use, it also means caring for the streams and rivers that many people rely on for their drinking water, sanitation, livelihoods, and cultural and spiritual wellbeing.

A time to reflect

It's time to step back and consider the multiple values of rivers, including Indigenous values and kinship grounded in customary laws and traditions; for art, for culture, for livelihoods, for supporting basic human rights and needs (including drinking water), for recreation, and for all living things, not just people.

Tragically, most of the world's rivers are in trouble, and the problem is most acute in arid and semi-arid environments where water governance serves the few at the expense of the many, especially Indigenous peoples who are often marginalised in water governance processes. While climate change and droughts contribute to river decline, as does water pollution, dam-building and land clearing, a key cause is water mismanagement that is aided, in part, by the administrative capture of science.

A major consequence of poor water governance is that too much water is extracted by water-intensive industries that are given priority over the people and ecosystems that rely on rivers for their survival. Yet, despite overwhelming evidence of global ongoing decline and a water emergency, those in power seem hellbent on increasing non-sustainable water consumption, including from our planet's dying rivers.

Water and life on the Barka

In 2019, a combination of over-extractions of water upstream, below-normal rainfall and high temperatures resulted in one of Australia's most important rivers, the Darling River (also known as the Barka or Baaka River along its lower reaches) running dry. While the Barka River has run low before, dry spells are becoming increasingly severe and more frequent, with multiple and serious negative ecological impacts from increasing still-water events exacerbated by weir pools and greater "run-of-the-river" water extractions.



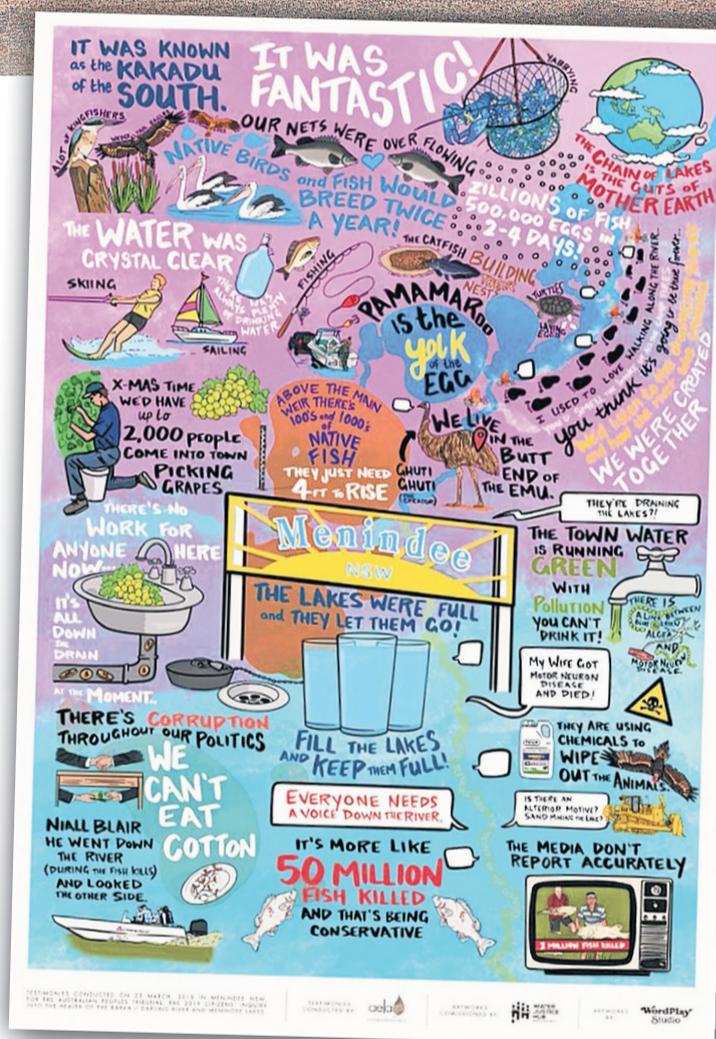
FORGOTTEN RIVER
AN OUTBACK TRAGEDY

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Testimonies of the people of the Darling/Barka River have been captured, above, in a series of posters created by artists Rix Lee and Tom Horne of WordPlay Studio. **Top:** A mural in Wilcannia tells the story. **Main picture:** Dion Georgopoulos

Adding to the problems of the Barka River are water theft, "missing flows", floodplain harvesting (possibly illegal, according to the NSW Crown Solicitor), and water planning that has its priorities "back to front" - in other words, water for communities and basic needs should come before irrigation, but has not.

Worse yet, these well-documented failures are occurring in NSW, where water management operates under a key principle that "water quality of all water sources should be protected and, wherever possible, enhanced" (as set out in the Water Management Act 2000).

The relevant water sharing plan for the Barka River, still in force today, was modified in 2012. The changes removed some pumping restrictions, allowed irrigators to extract water from rivers with much larger diameter pipes, and to extract water, in any one year, up to three times the annual allowable maximum on their water licence. These changes contributed to an increase in upstream extractions for irrigation over the period of 2014-17, which, in turn, caused an "anthropogenic" drought. This has reduced water availability and water quality for downstream communities, and also for the water-depend-

ent ecosystems along the Barka River and its wetlands.

People of the Barka

Extractions from surface waters, which can account for as much as 80 per cent of annual flows in times of drought, impose a big cost on the river and downstream users. For instance, there are over 700 residents living in the town of Wilcannia, located on the banks of the Barka River. They saw their town run out of water in 2018. In response to this water emergency that lasted many months, and in the absence of a co-ordinated government response, drinking water was supplied by the

community coming together, with volunteers trucking in tens of thousands of water cartons.

The town of Menindee's water supply is retained behind a weir on the river. This supply suffered from blooms of blue-green algae that continued long after the drought ended. At Menindee, and its nearby culturally significant lakes, there was also a major ecological disaster that included a series of devastating fish kills at the end of 2018 and early 2019. According to a scientific panel established by the Australian Academy of Science to investigate this disaster, the fish kills were caused by insufficient stream flow;

primarily a result of too much water extraction upstream.

Locals in far-western NSW had been warning state and federal members of parliament about these issues since the early 2000s. At a state parliamentary inquiry in 2016, locals explicitly stated that if current management practices were not improved, devastating conditions would return.

Citizens speak

As a result of the unfolding river disasters, and with due respect for the local and traditional knowledge holders of Barka River communities, a small group of volunteers came together to establish a "citizens' inquiry" into the health of the Barka Darling River and Menindee Lakes. This citizen's inquiry visited several towns along the river and invited residents to give their testimony. Those who gave witness were asked to respond to key questions such as: What is the current state of the Barka-Darling River? What are the prime causes?

Testimonies were given by 17 residents from Menindee and 15 from Wilcannia. The lived experiences of these Menindee and Wilcannia residents, given at the citizen's inquiry, came together in a virtual exhibition held last month. Convened by the Water Justice Hub, the Aquawhen? exhibition aimed to amplify the voices of the Barka to the world. The exhibition included pictorials created by artists Rix Lee and Tom Horne for each testimony, and two short films created by Dan Schulz and Otis Filley; one filmed in 2019-20 when the river was dry, and another in 2021 that coincided with high stream flows.

'This is Barka River. That's our mother'

In the words of Barkindji elder Cyril Hunter, featured in the exhibition: "This is Barka River. That's our mother, that's our nature and without nature nothing will survive."

Barkindji woman Rhonda Hynch also featured. She posed the ultimate question about the Barka River: "Why have they chosen cotton and rice over life?"

Isn't it time that Rhonda Hynch's question received a response? And isn't it time to listen to the voices of the river and its peoples?

|| This article was prepared by Australian National University's Water Justice Hub. For more information, email quentin.grafton@anu.edu.au