

Indigenous owners hope ancient eel traps will be recognised as world heritage

Gunditjmara people to find out if Australian government has accepted bid for 6,000-year-old network of fish traps in Victoria to be put forward



Traps were built by the Gunditjmara people to manage eels in Lake Condah. They are considered the largest example of ancient freshwater fishing structures created by hunter-gatherers in the world.

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Traditional owners pushing for a 6,000-year-old network of eel traps in south-west Victoria to be included on the world heritage list will find out next month if the Australian government has accepted their bid.

The traps were built by the Gunditjmara people to manage eels in Lake Condah and nearby Darlot Creek and are among the earliest surviving examples of aquaculture.

Known as Budj Bim, the site received national heritage listing in 2004 and has been put forward for inclusion in the Australian government's nomination to the Unesco world heritage council by the Victorian government, at the instigation of the Gunditjmara people, as part of an \$8m management plan.

Gunditjmara elder Dennis Rose said a world heritage listing would ensure the long-term protection of the site – some of which was damaged when non-Indigenous farmers drained the lake at the end of the 19th century – and also attract visitors to the area.

Work has already begun to improve the area for visitors, with proposed construction of interpretive signage, improved access and a traditional eel aquaculture interpretation centre.

Gavin Jennings, the acting Aboriginal affairs minister, said it could become a world-class sustainable tourism site.

The traps are a series of canals and graded ponds, running for some 35km around the lake. Gunditjmara people manipulated water levels to encourage eels to swim into holding ponds, Rose said. He said they also placed funnel-shaped baskets at the spillway between ponds to ensure that smaller eels could slip through and larger eels be harvested.

The tunnels themselves were made on a lava flow, which was heated up and then chipped away leaving sturdy, lasting structures.

“Eels would be transferred from one pond to another, they would be fattened up, they would then be eaten,” Rose said.

The traps and other abundant wildlife provided by the lake allowed the Gunditjmara people to remain in one place, rather than following the nomadic lifestyle commonly associated with traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture.

They built “a couple of hundred” stone houses around the lake, which would be included in any world heritage application, Rose said.

“People were living in permanent buildings,” he said. “It’s about the richness of the region.”

The Gunditjmara were awarded native title over the area in 2007 and plugged the drain in the lake, allowing the fish traps to fill again.

Monash University professor of Indigenous archeology, Ian McNiven, said that carbon dating of charcoal found during an excavation of one of the fish traps found it was 6,600 years old.

McNiven said that particular site, the Muldoons trap complex, appeared to have been remade a number of times over the intervening six millennia, indicating it was continually used.

“Muldoon trap complex is currently the oldest known stone-walled fish trap in the world and amongst the world’s oldest known fish traps,” he told Guardian Australia. “It is also the oldest continuously used fish trap in the world ... Indeed, the trap was still being used by Gunditjmara people at the Lake Condah Mission in the late 19th century.”

McNiven said the extensive network of traps were the “largest example of ancient freshwater fishing structures created by hunter-gatherers in the world” and were also important evidence in destroying the myth that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people did not farm or improve the land, which was part of the argument made by colonisers claiming terra nullius.

“Clearly, the Gunditjmara rupture the idea that Australian Aboriginal hunter-gatherers simply lived off the natural available food in the environment,” he said.

The deliberate manipulation of the environment to ensure better production of fish was a sophisticated form of agriculture, which McNiven said was of world heritage significance.

“It is a story that allows a new conception of Aboriginal people as active environmental manipulators and manager for thousands of years to be heard and recognised on an international scale,” he said.