



Indigenous investigations

For centuries the rivers sustained Aboriginal culture. Now they are dry, elders despair

Indigenous people and farmers alike fear Walgett has only six months left if they don't get water

by Lorena Allam and Carly Earl
22 Jan 2019

Driving across a bone-dry riverbed at Walgett, it's easy to believe the worst predictions of climate disaster are happening as the temperature gauge on the car dashboard hits 49C.

Two rivers meet outside Walgett in north-west New South Wales: the Barwon and the Namoi. They are major tributaries in the Murray Darling system.

But they're both empty, and this has never happened before.

Gamilaraay and Yuwalaraay elders who have lived on these rivers all their lives cry when they say they have never seen it as bad as this, and they doubt it can ever be recovered.



The empty Barwon River

“This to me is the ultimate destruction of our culture,” Gamilaraay elder Virginia Robinson says, sitting with the Dhariwaa elders group in Walgett.

“All people think about now is there’s no water. Aboriginal people were very close to nature and that’s all unbalanced now. There’s no nature to go back to.

“We’ve got no water, no special places to go, no animals to hunt. Our totem animals are dead, their bones are everywhere.”

It’s a triple whammy: drought, land-clearing and climate change
Virginia Robinson



The decomposing body of a kangaroo on the side of the Castlereagh Hwy

As all of Australia endured a heatwave last week, locals in the western NSW towns of Walgett and Lightning Ridge just shrugged. Almost every day in summer is 40C or above here; the heat is business as usual.

And there's been a prolonged drought. The Walgett shire, some 22,336 sq km, is drought-declared. Usually, the rivers provide the only relief: swimming, fishing for yellow belly (golden perch) or Murray cod, catching and cooking yabbies and mussels in a billycan on the riverbank, and seeking the solace of a big sleepy red gum.

But this time there are no rivers. The Narran, the Namoi and the Barwon are all dry, or reduced to a series of green, stagnant weir pools. The mighty red gums, roots exposed, are hanging on for dear life. The heritage-protected Narran Lakes and wetlands are empty too, and with them have gone the breeding grounds of native birds and fish.

Gamilaraay people and farmers rarely agree, but they are all worried their town of Walgett has six months to live if they don't get any more water.

A few weeks ago, the Keepit Dam upstream released a series of "environmental" flows that started to trickle down into their part of the Namoi five days ago.

A couple of farmers have come down to the boat ramp outside Walgett this morning to see if the river has risen overnight, but it looks like it's pooling at the weir and won't reach the town pumps.

After this flow, the Keepit Dam is down to 0.5% capacity; there will be no more water coming down the river unless it rains. Walgett will have to live on bore water

indefinitely. Bore water is high in mineral content, especially sodium. It kills gardens and discolours basins and bathtubs. It comes out of the tap very warm – there’s no need to turn on the hot tap to have a shower, but there’s also no chance for a cool drink of water from the tap.

Two weeks ago, NSW Health issued an alert for the safe use of bore water, alarming some locals by describing the potential for amoebic meningitis.

NSW Health’s director of environmental health, Richard Broome, said the amoeba that occurs in warm natural surface waters and soil causes infection which is rare but nearly always fatal.

“Amoebic meningitis can occur if water containing active amoebae goes up someone’s nose,” Broome said.

“At particular risk are people in rural areas who have their own tank, dam or bore water supply, such as those living on farms, and people with poorly maintained swimming pools.

“Any unchlorinated water supply that seasonally exceeds 30C or continually exceeds 25C may be a risk. This includes lakes, rivers, dams, bores, tanks, garden hoses, natural hot springs, and spa and swimming pools that are poorly maintained.

“People should be careful to prevent water going up their nose while swimming, diving or falling into warm, unchlorinated water, or while children are playing under garden sprinklers,” Broome said.

NSW Health staff arrived in Walgett to monitor the water quality on Friday.

Locals say bore water is not a long-term option as a drinking supply. There are stage five water restrictions – no outdoor water during daylight hours, limited washing and flushing of toilets, limits on the use of evaporative air conditioners.

Keith Burke watches his grandkids, Jai and Connor, throwing rocks into the green river.



Local man Keith Burke standing in the empty Namoi River

“People are talking about the fish kill at Menindee. It’s terrible, but what do you think happened to all the fish along 200km of the river here? What about us people?” Burke says.

The water crisis was made worse last week when the town bore pump failed and there was no running water at all. Crowdfunding campaigns sprang up across NSW to send fresh water to Walgett – truckloads of bottled water. The pump was repaired and the bore water is back, but locals are at the end of their patience.

When we’ve got no water in our rivers, it feels like we’re drained as well
Vanessa Hickey

“We appreciate the water that people are bringing us,” Robinson says.

“But it’s not the solution. We want to advocate for better water management. This is not the drought. It’s worse than that.

“It’s a triple whammy: drought, land clearing and climate change – that means no water.”

“When your totem animals are gone – the *bandarr* [kangaroo], the *dhinawan* [emu] – who are you as a person?”

Vanessa Hickey lives on the western side of town near the levee bank, and spent her life on the river. When she heard there was water flowing into the Namoi she bundled up her kids and they went down to see.

“It was just a trickle,” Hickey says. “But oh! The feeling of watching it arrive, it was great. I felt real happy and alive again.

“For a lot of my people here, when we’ve got no water in our rivers, it feels like we’re drained as well.



Vanessa Hickey standing next to the empty Barwon River

“When we got water, we’re happy. We are river people.

“All I want to do is protect it. I’ve seen the destruction in 20 years. Look at it now!

“We had two beautiful, flowing, fast rivers. Today, we got nothing, I can touch the bottom of the Barwon. 20 years ago, we would jump in, trying to touch the bottom.

It took a few greedy people, and now we’ve got nothing
Vanessa Hickey

“My kids are never going to have what I had growing up and that’s heartbreaking for me. It’s sad. It took a few greedy people, and now we’ve got nothing.

“I don’t like coming down here, sharing stories with my son, I just break down and cry. What is there for him?

“You got no water, you got no life.”

Hickey wants to develop a ranger program to look after country, to monitor the health of the rivers and make sure water users do the right thing.

“I’d sit out here all night if I had to, if it made a difference.”

There’s lots of roadkill on the road from Walgett to Lightning Ridge – kangaroos, emus, the odd wild pig – drawn to the grass on the roadside and felled by road trains carrying feed or cattle or cotton.

Rhonda Ashby lives in Lightning Ridge, and teaches Gamilaraay language at the school. Ashby was born and raised on the banks of the Barwon River at Walgett.

“I haven’t got words for how this feels. It’s a deep grief,” Ashby says.



Rhonda Ashby and her nephew Creed Gordon in Lightning Ridge

“I remember those rivers being crystal clear. As kids we used to dive for mussels and throw them back up the bank to cook and eat.”

The river has a responsibility ... It’s the bloodline of this country
Rhonda Ashby

“There were stories about the water dog, Marrayin, the mirri, going down all the way to Menindee. The water dog lived in a water hole there and we knew to be careful and not be there after dark. He was there to make us aware of the rules,” she says.

“The river has a responsibility not just to us, but to plant and animals. It has a right to connect up to other waters. It’s the bloodline of this country. It’s like us: if our blood stops flowing, we get sick. The water, if that flow stops, we all become sick.”

“When I lost my mum, the first place I looked to go was the river. I didn’t want to be around people, I went to the river and sat and mourned. It helped me to grieve.



“It’s like a library. The river is a quiet space. Those trees are like books, full of stories of the place, it’s a place of knowledge. It’s where you look for quietness.”

North of Lightning Ridge is the Narran River, another artery in the Murray-Darling system. It’s where my grandmother was born. There are a couple of birthing trees still left, where Yuwalaraay women would have their babies. Newborns were washed in the river. People knew the exact spot on the riverbank where their life began.

The Narran is dry too. Brenda McBride is a senior Gamilaraay-Yuwalaraay woman taking care of this place.

The water, McBride says, is held in massive dams upstream by irrigators, miners and pastoralists, including the huge Cubbie station.

Cubbie is licensed to take 460,000 megalitres, the equivalent of all irrigation entitlements downstream in north-western NSW, for its cotton farms.

McBride picks up a handful of black soil where the river used to be.

“These veins off the Murray-Darling are just as important as the river. The water has got a memory. It lives in a cycle. Everyone’s pulling the water out, so it’s just not coming here. With land clearing we get dust storms every week. It just breaks your heart.

“You can walk up and down the Narran. Nothing. We know who’s got the water – Cubbie.”

“Where is our water? For our totems – you’re the turtle, I’m the *dhinawan*, the emu. That’s a part of you, gone.”

Just on sunset, Ashby takes us up to Kangaroo Point in Lightning Ridge. Her nephew Creed, 12, is in the car.

I ask him, what does he think of the water shortages?



Gamilaraay elder and cultural educator Brenda McBride standing in the empty Narran River north of Lightning Ridge

“It’s so bad. It makes me sad what’s happening, with irrigation and mismanagement of the water.

“Some say it’s drought but it’s cockies [landholders] pumping all the water out,” Creed says.

“Water is life. Most people grew up on the river hearing stories and if there’s no river, where’s our culture?”