

4th Lake Eyre Basin Aboriginal Forum

Tibooburra, NSW, 13-15 September 2011

‘Water, land and connections across the Lake Eyre Basin — Sharing the journey and passing on knowledge’

The fourth Lake Eyre Basin (LEB) Aboriginal Forum was held from 13 to 15 September 2011 in Tibooburra, western NSW. This area, known as ‘Corner Country’ is close to Cameron Corner, the place where New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia meet. Over 40 Aboriginal people from across the Basin attended the forum to re-establish and build new connections, and share their knowledge and visions for the future of the LEB. The 35 non-Aboriginal participants included invited scientists, historians and representatives from government and non-government agencies.

The forum program

The three day forum program aimed to:

- Re-establish and form new links and relationships between Aboriginal people and groups across the Basin
- Increase and improve understanding of the Basin, its special features, and its importance
- Share stories of looking after water, land and culture across the Basin
- Describe past recommendations and review progress from previous Aboriginal Forums
- Further shape visions, critical needs and actions for water and land in the LEB
- Share and shape the LEB Aboriginal map project
- Bring our young people into the LEB journey

Dennis Sommerfield, retired Chair of the Tibooburra Local Aboriginal Land Council, provided a welcome to country for all forum attendees. The program was expertly facilitated by Scott Goringe (Aboriginal member of the LEB Community Advisory Committee) and Mark Butz, with assistance from our forum MC, Dave Thompson, the remaining five Aboriginal LEB CAC members, plus the LEB Facilitator, Vol Norris. The forum program was a combination of focussed discussions about the future of the Lake Eyre Basin, and presentations on key issues, including:

‘Grounding in Place’

Roy and June Barker – Life in and around the Corner Country during and after the time of Aboriginal removals; the strengths and values that kept people strong.

‘Remembering and reconnecting’

Luise Hercus – ‘It’s not a corner, it’s a crossroads’

Joc Schmiechen – ‘The unique Lake Eyre Basin’

Vol Norris/Dave Dolman/George Cooley – ‘The LEB Agreement and previous Aboriginal Forums’



Photo by Matt Turner

Honouring Knowledge — ‘Cultural heritage meets western science’

Dale McNeil – ‘The Neales River & Algebuckina Waterhole project, South Australia’

Mick Starkey – ‘Gawler Ranges rockholes project, South Australia’

Rickie Archer – ‘Western CMA Cultural Knowledge System, NSW’

Anna Gilfillan – ‘Territory NRM/Central Land Council Indigenous Ecological Knowledge project, NT’

Ronnel Frazer – ‘Georgina Diamantina Cooper Aboriginal Group Traditional Ecological Knowledge recording project, Qld’

Dale McNeil – ‘River management knowledge and challenges, and the LEB Rivers Assessment project’

Blackie Gordon – ‘The Darling River System through my eyes’

Ingrid Witte – ‘Sturt National Park and Lake Pinaroo’

‘LEB water and land management issues’

Gavin Mudd – ‘The Lake Eyre Basin & Mining Impacts: Current Status vs Future Issues’

Dean AhChee – ‘Witjira National Park, co-management, and groundwater’

Rupert Quinlan and Anthony Esposito – ‘Cooper Creek Wild Rivers proposed declaration’

Jimmy Richards – ‘Wild River Ranger Program’

Brad Moggridge – ‘Aboriginal participation in water planning (including groundwater) across Australia’

Field Trip — Lake Pinaroo

On Wednesday 14 September, many of the forum attendees joined us on an afternoon field trip to Lake Pinaroo, an ephemeral lake recognised as a wetland of international importance (Ramsar Convention) in Sturt National Park, lying just inside the Lake Eyre Basin and close to Cameron Corner. The lake and surrounding areas are of high ecological and cultural heritage value. There are a large number of Aboriginal sites, and the lake itself provides an important refuge for many species of plants and animals in the area, including at least 40 waterbird species. The forum attendees welcomed the opportunity to see the Corner Country that the Tibooburra Traditional Owners had talked about during the forum. Wangkumara man Peter Ebsworth welcomed us to the site and spoke of his experiences at the lake as a child.

Following the field trip, on Wednesday evening, Dick Kimber, writer, anthropologist and historian from Central Australia, gave a fascinating after dinner speech on some of the experiences of early white explorers in the Basin as they met, travelled with, were helped by and sometimes saved by the Aboriginal people of the LEB.

Aboriginal map workshop

A morning was devoted to a workshop on the Lake Eyre Basin Aboriginal Map, a project for the production of an Aboriginal map and booklet of the Lake Eyre Basin that communicates the richness, diversity and vibrancy of Aboriginal culture across the Basin, in a way that honours the desire of Aboriginal people to tell their story.

Initial concept designs for the map were presented. Workshop attendees discussed at length the information they wanted to see included in the map and booklet, such as stories, trade routes, tribal/language areas, rivers, creeks, other important water places, and Aboriginal managed lands. Attendees shared their knowledge, and offered their judgement and preferences for the content and design of the map. The mapping project graphic designers, CampbellBarnett from Sydney, attended the workshop to meet and hear first-hand from Aboriginal people in the Lake Eyre Basin.



Photo by Matt Turner

Discussion Outcomes

Following *each of the* forum presentations, the attendees held group discussions and generated a wide range of important questions, ideas, suggestions and desires for the future of the Lake Eyre Basin. A sample of these includes:

- Preserve old stories – to benefit the young people
- Giving traditional science the same value as western science — integrating western science and traditional knowledge and appropriate shared participation should be considered the standard approach
- Capture/share knowledge
- We don't own the land; the land owns us
- Strengthening Aboriginal networks in the Basin
- More ownership of water rights
- Important to work together and form partnerships, including respecting stories that criss-cross country
- How can all research projects work with Aboriginal people? How can we hear more about the science done on our country?
- What management will protect the water?
- How can we make water management dependent on environmental health?
- Contamination of groundwater by mining affects people, plants and animals

These ideas and questions were grouped under main headings (1 -6) below. The attendees discussed these in more detail and began to frame clear directions and recommendations for each of them. The wording and phrasing of these outputs have not been amended since they were recorded during the forum.

1. Science and Management Projects carried out in the LEB

- Allow transfer of information across the Basin
- Share outcomes and learnings
- Increase the communication of progress and outcomes
- Lists of project work to be published, distributed and updated

2. Extractive Industries and Groundwater (esp. Coal Seam Gas)

- Fully funded Rivers Assessment (LEBRA), including:
 - groundwater
 - consultation and participation of communities, Traditional Owners
- Reliable, updated information system with public access
- High level of recognition of risks associated with extractive industry

3. Traditional Ecological Knowledge

- Share and teach Traditional Ecological Knowledge using new technology and on-country, on-ground activities
- Respecting and honouring → consultation/networking
- LEB or National policy on Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Water Research

4. National Centre for Aboriginal Water Research

- Link western science to Traditional Ecological Knowledge
- Integrate into national policy agenda to ensure policy outcomes for all
- Consider groundwater and surface water as a connected resource
- Provide credible evidence to support/raise profile of cultural knowledge to inform/guide national and state and territory policy
- Aboriginal water allocations — to provide water for cultural, social, economic purposes determined by Aboriginal people

5. Cultural water and land management plan, LEB Authority — Sustaining the effort

- Co-management of LEB – e.g. through a unified management authority for the Basin – support current LEB Ministerial Forum initiative

- Dual leadership/management by Aboriginal people and community — including a power of veto over unwanted development
- Tied to an Action Plan:
 - be outcome oriented
 - bring solutions to problems

6. Wild Rivers Declaration

- The Aboriginal attendees at the 2011 LEB Aboriginal Forum agreed to call on the Queensland Government to:
 1. Declare the Cooper Creek, Georgina and Diamantina Rivers as Wild River Areas under the Wild Rivers Act.
 2. Commit resources for Traditional Owner Rangers in the three river basins under its policy to deliver 100 Indigenous Wild River Rangers; starting with 5 rangers (including ranger coordinators) for each of the three river basins - 15 Indigenous rangers in total.
 3. Support and resource an Aboriginal organisation which reflects their governance structure to oversee the Wild Rivers Rangers program within the Cooper Creek, Georgina and Diamantina Rivers for the Aboriginal Traditional Owners of these water systems.
 4. Incorporate water allocations under each Wild River declaration for Aboriginal water allocation for Traditional Owners to decide its use.
 5. Maintain the Aboriginal heritage and cultural landscapes of the three Wild River areas, by supporting management in accordance with the Aboriginal traditions and customs for the areas. (Joint Management)
 6. Exclude coal seam gas and shale gas projects, along with other mining and resource extraction, from the High Preservation Areas and Special Floodplain Management areas; and regulate coal seam gas and shale gas activities in the Preservation Areas.
 7. Ensure sustainable pastoral activity in the Wild River areas by committing Land Protection Officers to monitor and restrict overstocking.
 8. Call on the South Australian/New South Wales/Northern Territory Governments to support the protection of the LEB region with a commitment to a Wild River type legislation.

Where to from here?

The discussion outcomes and recommendations from the forum will be taken to the 25th meeting of the LEB Community Advisory Committee (CAC) being held in Adelaide on 7 December 2011, and the CAC will discuss what steps it should take to assist in communicating, supporting and implementing the outcomes and recommendations of the forum. The Wild Rivers recommendations above have been widely circulated by Scott Gorringer (in his capacity as a Mithaka man) both to Government and Opposition Members of Parliament in Queensland and the Australian Government.

The recommendations on the LEB Aboriginal map have been collated and discussed by the Project Management Group, and will be taken into account in the next version of the map, which will be distributed as part of the broader consultation for the map.

Thank you

Thanks to each of you who took the time to attend the 2011 Aboriginal Forum and gave so generously of your experience and knowledge. Thank you to the local traditional custodians from the Corner Country who generously hosted us in their country and showed us something of their special landscape on our trip to Lake Pinaroo. And thank you to the townspeople of Tibooburra, who hosted us, accommodated us, fed us, and provided such a friendly welcome to your home town.

The full forum report and proceedings will include copies of slides and talks, copies of all recommendations and key issues, and will be made available via the Lake Eyre Basin web site (www.lebmf.gov.au) and in hard copy for participants.



Photo by Matt Turner