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The Australian Rangeland Society

Western Catchment Aboriginal knowledge system – *Through our eyes: Aboriginal knowledge, past present future*

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Abstract

The Western Catchment Management Authority (CMA) works with local people to improve the management of natural resources. In line with the government's 'Caring for Our Country' priorities we believe that raising awareness and providing information about Aboriginal perspectives on natural resource management will improve the management of our natural resources. Aboriginal people have much to teach today's land managers and the wider community about caring for our country. Here we will present a DVD that is part of a larger project to document Aboriginal land management practices and cultural knowledge. Our aim is to make this knowledge accessible for current and future generations.

Introduction

The Western Catchment Management Authority (CMA) works with local people to improve the way we manage our natural resources: land, vegetation, rivers, groundwater, biodiversity and cultural heritage. In line with NSW Government, Australian Government 'Caring for Our Country' priorities and the Western CMA Catchment Action Plan, it is anticipated that raising awareness and providing information about Aboriginal perspectives on natural resource management will improve the management of our natural resources.

The Western Catchment of NSW comprises 29% of the state and is home to 18,000 residents. There are thirteen currently identified Aboriginal language groups within the Western catchment and Aboriginal people make up 21% of the catchment population.

As part of the Western CMA management targets, an Aboriginal Reference Advisory Group (ARAG) was formed in September 2006 to formally evaluate and coordinate activities that involve the Aboriginal community of the Western Catchment in improving natural resources. The ARAG is comprised of representatives from each of the thirteen Aboriginal language groups and communities with large Aboriginal populations within the Western Catchment. As well as providing input to identify areas of cultural significance, the group advises the Western CMA Board on how to ensure that decisions affecting the long-term sustainability of the environment are compatible with Indigenous culture and values.

Knowledge system

One of the management targets set out in the Western Catchment Action Plan is to: 'Develop and assist the implementation of a process for the documentation, evaluation and ownership of indigenous knowledge of sustainable land management and cultural values in the Western Catchment'. To meet this goal, The Western Catchment ARAG and the Western CMA are working towards the collation of Aboriginal natural resource management into a knowledge system entitled *Through our eyes: Aboriginal knowledge: past present future*. The end product of this knowledge system will be a web-enabled database from the Western CMA website that will link users to relevant organisations, documents and audio and video files.

DVD- 'Through Our Eyes: Aboriginal Knowledge: Past present and Future'

A key element of this knowledge system is a series of videos, which highlight Aboriginal people's relationship to the natural environment, as well as the interconnectedness and vital significance of Aboriginal culture to natural resource management. These videos will be compiled into a DVD with 2,500 copies available for distribution to schools, community groups and the general public.

The 'Through our Eyes' DVD features Aboriginal Elders and knowledge holders from the Ngemba, Kamilaroi and Euahlayi language groups speaking about the land management practices and cultural knowledge that enabled people to care for their country for thousands of years before European settlement.

Aboriginal people walked very lightly across the country and the way they used the natural resources, such as water, plants and animals ensured the long-term sustainability of the environment. Indigenous Australians have a deep connection with the land. The area of country they are from forms an integral part of their identity. They belong to the land and believe that everything comes from the land and goes back to the land.

When European people moved into the Western Catchment from the 1860s they disregarded and disrupted the practices of Aboriginal people. Government policy later forcibly removed Aboriginal people from their traditional lands, which affected their ability to practice and maintain their way of life.

It is not anticipated that all language groups and subject areas will be documented by video. This DVD is a pilot project, which focuses on the Eastern section of the Catchment. Video content will be one of a number of communication tools utilised to cover the knowledge of all thirteen language groups and subject matter for this project.

Table 1: Language Groups within the Western Catchment

| Language Group* | Closest town |
|-----------------|------------------------------|
| Baarkindji | Wilcannia |
| Bandjigali | White Cliffs |
| Barundji | Wanaaring |
| Budgidi | Wanaaring |
| Danggali | Menindee |
| Euahlayi | Goodooga and Lightning Ridge |
| Kamilaroi | Walgett and Collarenebri |
| Kunja | Engonnia |
| Murrawari | Weilmoringle and Goodooga |
| Ngemba | Brewarrina and Bourke |
| Wandjiwalgil | Broken Hill |
| Wangkumara | Tibooburra |
| Wongaibon | North of Cobar |

*Different spellings of Aboriginal words reflect the fact that the consonants p and b, k and g, and t and d are not distinguished in most Aboriginal languages. The Western CMA uses the spelling identified by the Western Catchment ARAG.

Table 2: Subject areas that will be covered by the knowledge system

- Plants for food
- Plants for medicine
- Water
- Creation stories
- Fire management
- Tools and their uses
- Cultural sites
- Animals for ceremony and spiritual beliefs
- Animals for food
- Plants-other
- Cultural beliefs and customs
- Aboriginal history
- European history

The 'Through our Eyes' DVD will feature 18 films between three and four minutes each:

- Project Description, overview and welcome to country
- Billabongs with Ben Flick
- Yambacoona Mountain with Paul Gordon
- Dhinawan (emu) in the sky with Ben Flick
- Native foods at Narran Lake with Brenda McBride
- Life on the River with Lionel (Charlie) Williams
- Life on the River with Diane Kelly
- Brewarrina to Byrock with Brad Steadman
- How the Kamilaroi and Ngemba people were connected with Ben Flick
- How the Thigabillas and Mt Oxley were created with Paul Gordon
- Gilgais and caring for water with June Barker
- Native foods near Lightning Ridge with Brenda McBride
- Native plants near Collarenebri with Ben Flick
- Using plants as medicine with Brenda McBride and Ben Flick
- Using fire to care for country with Roy Barker
- Sustaining animal populations with Roy Barker
- Kids in the Catchment
- Narran Lake with Ted Fields and Brenda McBride

Throughout the Rangeland Conference you will have the opportunity to view a selection of videos from the 'Through our Eyes' DVD.

Conclusion

Aboriginal people have much to teach today's land managers and the wider community about caring for our country. This DVD is part of a larger project to document Aboriginal land management practices and cultural knowledge and to make it accessible for current and future generations.

The Western CMA would like to acknowledge all members of the Western Catchment ARAG and everyone involved in the production of the 'Through Our Eyes' DVD.

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