



Media Statement

Friday 14 October 2022

Traditional Owner voices in the Murray-Darling Basin

The Albanese Government's significant reprioritisation of water resources and cultural flows of the Murray-Darling Basin is heartening for Traditional Owners.

Yesterday's meeting of the Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council reinforces the importance of Traditional Owner access to water entitlements and the fundamental role of Traditional Owners in managing Country and Waters.

Victoria is leading the way in redefining water policy development, acknowledging the cultural importance and responsibility of Traditional Owners for Country water.

Since 2016, the Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations has been working with the Victorian government to ensure that Traditional Owners lead water policy reform. The Victorian Minister for Water, the Hon. Harriet Shing, has supported this work, recently finalising [Water is Life: Traditional Owner Access to Water Roadmap](#):

"Traditional Owners have enduring cultural, spiritual, and economic connections to land, water and resources. They have managed land and water sustainably over thousands of generations on Country, and these connections deserve respect and recognition."

The inclusion of Nation Statements in *Water is Life* shows a significant shift in the way policy is being developed in Victoria. Across the diverse voices of Traditional Owners provided in their Nation Statements, there is a common refrain that Traditional Owners must be enabled to realise their rights to water and to be decision makers as rights holders.

Paul Paton, CEO of the Federation, identified that:

"Water is Life is a significant step forward, but there are many more steps along the journey to continue to implement a fundamental shift towards recognising Traditional Owner knowledge and responsibilities."

Building on the ground breaking work being undertaken in Victoria, the Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council should look to First Nations to inform and lead policy for First Nations accessing and holding water entitlements. This can be taken forward without fear of disrupting the market. A July 2022 [Marsden Jacob Case Study Evaluation](#) shows that Government purchase of secure high reliability water for Traditional Owners would not distort the Victorian market.

In light of this, the Ministerial Council's reinvigoration of the 2016 commitment to \$40m to purchase water is pleasing, but as shown in [Assessing the value of Victorian water entitlements](#), developed by Marsden Jacob for the Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations, the price of high reliability water shares has increased exponentially since 2016, affecting the decisions to be made and outcomes Traditional Owners have long called for.

We are sure that the Hon. Tanya Plibersek, as Chair of the Council and the Minister responsible for Traditional Owner cultural heritage legislation and Environment, will remain focused on the importance of water to Traditional Owners' wellbeing and the health of Country.

For Traditional Owners, culture is embodied in Country, in practice and in people. Cultural heritage is therefore far more than the many artefacts located within the vicinity of waterways, but also comprises the dreaming stories, law/lore, totemic relationships, songs, ceremonies and ancestral spirits. As such water is sacred, water is culture, water is life.

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About the Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations

The Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations is the Victorian state-wide body that convenes and advocates for the rights of Traditional Owners while progressing wider social, economic, environmental and cultural objectives. We support the progress of agreement-making and participation in decision-making to enhance the authority of Traditional Owner Corporations on behalf of their communities.

The Federation was established in 2013 by Traditional Owner Corporations who recognised that through a path of working together Traditional Owner Groups could be stronger and could advance their shared interests in policy engagement, and in creating economic opportunities and caring for Country.

Further Information

[Water is Life: Traditional Owner Access to Water Roadmap](#)

[Assessing the value of Victorian water entitlements - A Marsden Jacob Report](#)

[Traditional Owner water use case study evaluation - A Marsden Jacob Short Report](#)

[Leave the Door Open for Traditional Owners to Access and Own Water](#)

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