

Aboriginal Water Officer Case Study

Dylan Lawson

First People of the Millewa Mallee Aboriginal Corporation

Dylan Lawson, Aboriginal Water Officer at the First People of the Millewa Mallee Aboriginal Corporation (FPMMAC), a proud Latji Latji – Barkindji Man, is helping bring water back to Musk Duck. Dylan manages waterways and surrounding Country in partnership with Traditional Owners, the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) and other stakeholders. It's a labour-intensive role, but Dylan loves being out on Country.

Dylan is one of many Aboriginal Water Officers (AWOs) across the state of Victoria. AWOs engage with community on Country, take care of Country, and facilitate (re)connection to waterscapes, often with opportunities for Elders to share their water knowledge. Funded through the Aboriginal Water Program, AWOs deliver self-determined priorities and projects as well as engaging with government and the water sector to advocate Traditional Owner water priorities.

Dylan stands proud next to Musk Duck Wetland. New saltbush shrubs and black box trees are growing, frogs and birds are chirping, and kangaroos and emus come by for a drink. This healthy Country was completely dry not long ago. Musk Duck was chosen by FPMMAC for an environmental watering (e-watering) trial site. The wetland sits about 75 kilometres from Mildura, on Latji Latji Country. In 2022, the site was flooded and then dried out, leaving it without water for two years. Dylan and his team worked in collaboration for e-water to be delivered to the wetland, re-filling it and rejuvenating surrounding Country.

The trial involved direct input from community and Elders, with 50 Traditional Owners visiting Musk Duck for cultural assessments and aspirations yarns. Getting guidance from Elders is an important part of Dylan's job. It is also important for Dylan to make young ones feel welcome when they come out on Country. "As long as we keep teaching, our culture doesn't die out. We need a strong cultural lens over everything to keep our kids proactive. Fishing, gathering – that's enjoying life."

Dylan approaches his work through a whole-of-Country lens – you can't change one part of Country without thinking about the ripple effects. "You need to know Country like the back of your hand, by getting out there, exploring and observing what Mother Nature is doing." Bringing Elders' vision to reality, the FPMMAC water team began introducing 10 megalitres of e-water to Musk Duck per day, until the wetland was up to 100 megalitres full and the Country entered a healing wet cycle. "When Country's sick, Aboriginal people feel sick as well," Dylan says.

For Dylan, healthy Country means being able to facilitate traditional ways of being. For his ancestors, Country was where it all began. "The river was more or less a black man's highway – we travelled downstream and upstream along river systems," Dylan says. Dylan hopes to fill Musk Duck up to 200 megalitres, to be able to reintroduce native fish to the wetland, growing and nurturing them so they can return to the Murray River.

Dylan's vision is for the larger FPMMAC team – including the seed collection and nursery crew, river rangers and cultural burn team – to act out their long-term aspirations for healing Country. This would create continued opportunities for connection and employment within community. "I want to be able to pave the way, like my father, nana and loved ones before me to keep us going strong," Dylan says.

When the water was delivered, two full buses came to visit Musk Duck for a community day. For some Elders, it was their first time seeing the wetland filled with water. Since the water delivery, Dylan is involved in writing a set of guidelines to help other Traditional Owners write Seasonal Watering Proposals (SWPs), so they can implement their vision for their own Countries and have an increased role in e-water management. Aboriginal Water Officer roles like Dylan's have improved Traditional Owner capacity across the state to work with the water sector, with increased opportunities for Traditional Owner organisations to lead self-determined and Traditional Owner-led water projects and programs. Instead of being allocated water, Dylan sees a future where Traditional Owners are water holders.

FPMMAC wishes to thank the Aboriginal Water Unit, DEECA, Mallee CMA, the Victorian Environmental Water Holder, Trust for Nature and Parks Victoria for their ongoing partnership and involvement in the watering of Musk Duck.

“ You need to know Country like the back of your hand, by getting out there, exploring and observing what Mother Nature is doing. ”

Dylan Lawson



Energy,
Environment
and Climate Action



FIRST PEOPLE
OF THE
MILLEWA-MALLEE
ABORIGINAL CORPORATION