

# Water is Life

## Traditional Owner Access to Water Roadmap

### Traditional Owners FACT SHEET

The *Water is Life: Traditional Owner Access to Water Roadmap* is an important step towards self-determination in water access and management for Traditional Owners.

*Water is Life* will support Traditional Owners to Care for Country in ways that benefit Traditional Owners, the natural environment, and wider communities.

#### What is *Water is Life*?

*Water is Life* develops a pathway to genuine, meaningful outcomes for and in partnership with Traditional Owners. It takes a critically important step to reduce barriers and increase access to water and management of water landscapes for Traditional Owners.

Caring for Country, including its waterways, is the custodial obligation of Traditional Owners. Traditional Owners have managed land and water sustainably for thousands of generations. Keeping Country and water healthy can deliver thriving cultural economies and benefits for all Victorians.

*Water is Life* represents actual and symbolic respect for the importance of Aboriginal connections to Country. *Water is Life* involves changing the approach as it has operated for generations, but this change is necessary, and it can and should be achieved in balance with existing interests.

#### Why was *Water is Life* developed?

Currently, Traditional Owners hold less than 0.2 per cent of all water access entitlements across Victoria. It is time to recognise that their communities have thrived here for thousands of years and honour their relationship with land and waters.

*Water is Life* is a key deliverable from Water for Victoria – a policy that was developed by working with communities around Victoria to understand what they wanted to see from a sustainable and secure water supply future. In addition, in 2019, legislation was passed to enshrine Aboriginal cultural values and knowledge in water and catchment management into law for the first time and to include Traditional Owners in these processes.

#### What does *Water is Life* propose?

*Water is Life* proposes a series of actions the government will take in partnership with the water sector, existing water users and Traditional Owners to increase Traditional Owner access to water and management of water landscapes.

*Water is Life* proposes actions that could increase:

1. Traditional Owner participation in planning and decision-making over where and how environmental water is used
2. water entitlements held by Traditional Owners for their self-determined use
3. Traditional Owner participation in the management of Victoria's water landscapes.

Consistent with the principle of self-determination, each proposed action does not mandate specific pathways for every Traditional Owner and will enable each Traditional Owner group to determine whether and how to participate in each process.

#### What will Traditional Owner participation in environmental water look like?

*Water is Life* develops a framework that includes options to directly submit seasonal watering proposals to the VEWH, manage the delivery of environmental water on Country, or work with the VEWH as environmental water holders.

Traditional Owners are already participating in environmental water planning and management. As this role increases, further barriers to self-determination will be identified and addressed. In addressing these barriers, we will ensure stakeholders will be part of the conversation to support any potential future legislation for Traditional Owner access, use and management of water may look like.

#### When will Traditional Owners receive water entitlements?

Some Traditional Owners across Victoria are already accessing water entitlements. *Water is Life* provides a framework to solidify and streamline these processes to create well-rounded management approaches.

Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation received 2 gigalitres of water in the Mitchell River from the Victorian Government, which was celebrated as a major step forward for Indigenous water rights in 2020.



Other water entitlement returns underway include 2.5 gigalitres of previously unallocated water from the Fitzroy (Palawarra) and 1.36 gigalitres of water savings from the Connections Project. The Lower Murray Water Water Efficiency Project will also share water savings between the environment and Traditional Owners, as well as secure urban water supply.

## How will Traditional Owners be involved in the management of waterways?

*Water is Life* proposes a process that may lead to the recognition of Traditional Owners as waterway managers for specific locations. The Victorian Government will work with Traditional Owners to identify and address barriers preventing them from taking on waterway management responsibilities for these locations.

This work does not change the existing statutory responsibilities of existing water agencies, nor the requirements to consult with community when making decisions. Rather, it will enable more complete, well-rounded management processes that balance Traditional Owners' cultural obligations, priorities and capacity with the roles and responsibilities of other waterway managers, entitlement holders and the broader community.

Victoria's existing environmental water and waterway management frameworks have been developed with communities over the past 25 years and are delivered through regional partnerships between the VEW and CMAs. There will continue to be an essential role for the VEW and CMAs as state agencies delivering environmental water and waterway management.

## How were Traditional Owners involved in the development of *Water is Life*?

*Water is Life* has been developed with Traditional Owners and is a document in two parts. It includes a government section with commitments to support Traditional Owners' access to water and decision

making about water access. The second part is made up of 27 Nation Statements prepared by Traditional Owner groups so that their voices can be heard without alteration, even though the content within the Nation Statements may not align with government policy.

In developing and implementing a state-wide strategy such as *Water is Life*, it is DELWP policy to work with all Traditional Owner groups who wish to participate, and that have the capacity (or wish to strengthen their capacity) to manage or own water.

## How will *Water is Life* be implemented?

The Victorian Government is proposing a staged and iterative approach to implementation of the actions in *Water is Life*. Implementation will be informed by pilot projects and an adaptive approach that supports Traditional Owners, the water sector, and existing entitlement holders to work together.

Nation Statements will inform the ways in which DELWP and water agencies work with Traditional Owners to implement the commitments set out in the government section of *Water is Life*.

How we do this, and the development of implementation options for *Water is Life* will be informed by wider engagement with Traditional Owners, key stakeholders, and the Victorian community. Our approach is consistent with Water for Victoria's commitment to strengthen local relationships and put community at the centre of decision-making.

Multiple Traditional Owners have commented on the importance of the establishment of Traditional Owner collaborative governance for oversight of the *Water is Life* implementation and evaluation process. DELWP has committed to establish a Traditional Owner Oversight Committee, and Traditional Owners will be invited to nominate a representative to join this committee. This role will be funded. It is proposed to include four meetings per year and may be an opportunity for you to further progress the issues raised in your Nation Statements.



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