

Traditional Owner Water Planning Activities



1. Sea Country Plans or Healthy Water Plans

Incorporating water values into your Healthy Country Plans or having a focused sea country or water plan is a good way to identify traditional and contemporary marine and fresh water values, goals and strategies through a collaborative, community-led process, to protect the health of Country for future generations. The Yirrganydji People developed a Cultural Landscape Water Plan.

Bana Mamingal Caring for Water - Yirrganydji - Sharing the important and inspiring stories that are reframing our narrative.

2. Whole of Catchment Planning

Whole of catchment planning offers a placed-based approach to holistic catchment planning and management. This approach enables multiple problems such as soil health, erosion control, riparian vegetation health and water quality to be considered within the broader landscape at the same time. Jaragun Ecoservices Pty Ltd has worked with Traditional Owners and other stakeholders to develop a whole of catchment plan to improve social, environmental, cultural and economic well-being.

Update of the Russell River Catchment Sustainability Plan 2020-2035

3. State Water Planning and Management

Queensland Government water planning process offers an opportunity to exercise existing interests and rights in freshwater. A guide aimed at improving the participation of First Nations in freshwater governance and management has been prepared by The Cairns Institute at James Cook University, Cairns.

First-Nations-and-Freshwater-in-North-Queensland-2023-Guide-Version-1-Web.pdf

4. Monitoring

Observing and recording (monitoring) the cultural, environmental, spiritual, social, and economic importance of water, often through methods like cultural assessments and new technological solutions, can tell us what is happening and changing, if water is healthy, if our targets and goals are being met in our plans. Some examples of Reef Traditional Owners leading water monitoring have been recorded by Wet Tropics Waterways.

Waterway Guardians: Traditional Owners Leading Reef Projects

5. Cultural Assessments

Cultural assessments are a way to consistently measure and prioritise river and wetland health, and to more effectively participate in water planning and management. Cultural assessments can also help identify and record water sites of value and assess places for water monitoring.

The Murray-Darling Basin Authority (2025) Aboriginal Waterways Assessment program describes processes used to develop a tool used for cultural assessment.

Aboriginal Waterways Assessment (AWA)

6. Cultural Indicators

Cultural indicators can help understand the overall health and wellbeing of Country. Based on intergenerational local Traditional Knowledges, cultural indicators can be used in a water quality monitoring program to inform the management of resources.

An example of cultural indicators which can be tangibly monitored and measured by community can be found in the Strong People - Strong Country Framework.

The Strong Peoples - Strong Country Framework - Sharing the important and inspiring stories that are reframing our narrative.

7. Cultural Flows

Determining cultural flows (how much water is needed to protect a communities cultural water uses and values) can be used to empower community to secure legally owned water entitlements. Cultural flows can be incorporated into water plans and monitoring programs to ensure there is enough healthy water to improve the spiritual, cultural, environmental, social and economic values.

A guide has been prepared by the Cultural Flows Planning and Research Committee as part of the National Cultural Flows Research Project, with the aim of helping to embed First Nations' water allocations in Australia's water management framework.

Further information can be found on the [Cultural Water Rights Factsheet](#).

Cultural Flows a Guide for First Nations

8. Seasonal Calendars

The Traditional Knowledge embedded in calendars, including seasonal water resource use, can be used in water planning and Healthy Country planning and management.

Seasonal calendars are a valuable tool that can inform water planning, management and monitoring programs.

Aboriginal communities and CSIRO have partnered to test the application of a season calendar methodology.

Indigenous seasonal calendars - CSIRO

9. Healthy Water Report Card

A Healthy Water Report Card is a way for Traditional Owners to record and publish data and recommendations from their healthy water monitoring projects.

The Madjandji people developed a Traditional Owner water report card recording both ecosystem health and cultural connections.

Traditional Owner Healthy Water 2: 2022-2024 - Madjandji Aboriginal Corporation

10. Upholding On-Country practices

Successful water management and planning requires respectful relationships with partners, and following Traditional Owner protocols. 'The Madja Code' is one example of a localised cultural governance and ethics framework developed by Eastern Kuku Yalanji (EKY) people to guide all research, development, tourism, and other significant activities undertaken on their Bubu (land) and Jalun (sea) estates.

Item - Eastern Kuku Yalanji Rainforest Bama Madja Code of Practice: 'The Madja Code', developed for the Eastern Kuku Yalanji Bama for the Joint management arrangements for their national parks (CYPAL) in Cape York - figshare - Figshare

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