

**Comments on Preliminary Assessment Report
Riverina Bioregion
Regional Forest Assessment**

**River Red Gums and Woodland Forests
September 2009**

From Neville Williams, Wiradjuri Elder

The Wiradjuri Nation is the largest in New South Wales, taking up about one third of the state and a large part of the Murray–Darling Basin. Our nation extends over the Victorian border across the Murray to the south in many places. It extends north to the Great Dividing Range to the other side of Coolah, eastwards to the Blue Mountains above Lithgow and westwards to near Hay and Ivanhoe.

Wiradjuri people have lived in this part of Australia for thousands of years. Many Wiradjuri still live within our nation's boundaries, although some do not. But we all continue to have bloodlines to Country, not just the place where we might be living now.

Local Aboriginal Land Councils (LALCs) do not necessarily represent all Wiradjuri people within the LALC boundaries. Some LALCs within the Wiradjuri nation may also employ Aboriginal people who cannot speak for us.

People working at land councils can come from beyond Wiradjuri borders and can sometimes be elected to run the councils and make decisions on our behalf. LALCs may also employ people who claim Aboriginal ancestry but do not have it or cannot prove bloodlines or connection to Wiradjuri country.

LALCs may also employ non-Aboriginal people who would not be able to represent land councils on Aboriginal cultural heritage assessments or other Aboriginal cultural heritage work.

People working for LALCs may be primary cultural knowledge holders but some may not for the above reasons.

It is culturally inappropriate for people who are not Wiradjuri to be making decisions about our cultural heritage.

Our connections and bloodlines to Wiradjuri country are not limited to LALC or native title claim boundaries. Although most of my immediate family currently live in Cowra, we have bloodlines and connections throughout Wiradjuri country beyond the limits of LALC boundaries. We therefore have cultural rights and knowledge beyond those boundaries in the Riverina as well as elsewhere in Wiradjuri country.

We don't divide up Wiradjuri country into bioregions in the way government departments have done. River Red Gums exist across Wiradjuri country. They are an Australian icon and culturally significant to Aboriginal people for many reasons such as those listed in the report but also for providing shelter, birthing trees and habitats for animals and birds such as snakes, goannas and owls as well as many others.

River Red Gums occur throughout Wiradjuri country along rivers and in wetland areas including as forests. These trees are dying across our country because they often do not receive the flooding they need at least every seven years. Some of the main reasons for this are climate change, drought, disappearing water supplies such as dams drying up, regulation of rivers that restrict flows to rivers and wetlands and the use of water for irrigation which did not happen in earlier times.

The Lachlan River flows throughout Wiradjuri country and feeds the Booligal Wetlands and the Great Cumbung Swamp, the only two wetlands mentioned in the report as being among 'the most notable sites' (page 170).

Wiradjuri people are concerned that River Red Gums across the Wiradjuri Nation are conserved and protected, just not those red gums in forests.

As the report states on page 170, 'the Lachlan region contains several important and large wetlands of national significance, however, there are no wetlands classified as Ramsar sites of international significance.'

Although this report is restricted to River Red Gum forests in the Riverina bioregion, we would like to take this opportunity to raise the issue of the fate of River Red Gums in other parts of Wiradjuri country that occur along the Lachlan River and elsewhere such as along creeks and in wetlands not covered in the Riverina Bioregion report.

For example, the Lake Cowal/Wilbertroy Wetlands fall within the bioregion next to the Riverina Bioregion—the South Western Slopes Bioregion. These wetlands are listed on the *Directory of Important Wetlands of Australia* and the Register of the National Estate.

Lake Cowal lies about 47 kilometres north-east of West Wyalong. It is the heartland of the Wiradjuri nation and the largest inland lake in New South Wales. It is a very significant, sacred place for the Wiradjuri—an Aboriginal sanctuary and has been a government wildlife reserve.

An ephemeral lake, like Lake George, Lake Cowal has water in it seven years out of 10, although sometimes it has been dry for up to 30 years. The lake has been largely dry since October 2001.

The Lachlan River is dammed in a number of places including the Jemalong Weir. Flows to Lake Cowal are restricted unless the Lachlan floods and overflows its banks or adjoining creeks overflow and run into the lake. Two of the creeks that run into the lake, Bland and Sandy Creeks, have been blocked where they enter the lake for about 12 years. Apparently farmers were licenced to do this. The lake bed has also been used for cropping which has disturbed naturally occurring plants and the habitats of waterbirds and other animals that visit the lake when it has water in it.

There is usually a rich diversity of animals, birds and plants in the region, even when the lake is dry. When there is water in the lake, it provides habitat for thousands of Australian and international migratory and other water birds as well as fish and other species.

In the report of the first Commission of Inquiry into the Cowal Gold Project in 1996, (Lake Cowal Gold Project Bland Shire — Forbes Shire, Report to the Honourable Craig Knowles, Minister for Urban Affairs and Planning and Minister for Housing), a number of objectors to the project strongly suggested that Lake Cowal should be nominated as a Wetland of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention.

The then National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) is quoted on page 35 of the Commission's report as stating that although there were some organisations that did not support the idea, there was 'widespread consensus among wetland ecologists and ornithologists that it satisfies the

criteria' for Ramsar listing. The NPWS also noted that the proposed mine would not necessarily preclude the lake being listed as a Ramsar wetland.

Since the construction, and later mine production, began at the Lake Cowal gold mine between 2004 and 2006, many mature trees including River Red Gums, have been cut down to make way for the mine. While young replacement trees have been planted, many have died. Habitat for animals and birds has been destroyed. Fauna deaths have occurred but under changed mine consent conditions, the company operating the mine no longer has to report them.

Unfortunately also, this year the Lake Cowal Foundation reported that up to 60 per cent of the species around Lake Cowal are threatened. (There are few, if any, Wiradjuri people actively involved in, and none holding official positions on, the foundation which was set up in 2000 as part of a deal with peak environment groups 'to protect and enhance Lake Cowal' when the mine was given the go ahead in 1999).

With a reduced number of mature trees, including River Red Gums, habitats at Lake Cowal for many species have been reduced. Climate change, drought, mine operations, (including the use of cyanide to leach gold from ore), rising salinity and restrictions on water flow to the lake, are among some of the factors that are possibly contributing to this reduction and the death of River Red Gums.

Also the Lachlan groundwater resource (connected to surface water resources) is under embargo and cannot continue to sustain being used by more and more households, farms and businesses like mining companies. We understand that it is inevitable that cyanide will leach into the water system surrounding the lake, poisoning an already limited resource.

Storage for the Lachlan River is in the Wyangala Dam that is fed by the Lachlan and the Abercrombie Rivers. On 24 October 2009 the level of the Wyangala Dam was 5.5 per cent. It had dropped to 5.4 per cent on 27 October 2009. The lowest dam level recorded since 1970 was 3 per cent in 1983. As the summer hots up evaporation will increase. Authorities are warning that if it does not rain soon, Wyangala Dam will be almost dry by April 2010.

On 1 November 2009 authorities will halve the flow to the Lachlan below the Wyangala Dam, the stores of which continue to diminish. Flows to the Lachlan will stop at Condobolin. Towns, farms and businesses

dependent on the Lachlan Catchment and groundwater, may well be without water very soon and have to have it trucked in.

Without regular water flows to the Lake Cowal/Wilbertroy wetlands, which cleanse the environment and act as an environmental filter, River Red Gums will continue to die. Given the receding amount of water that the Wyangala Dam holds, the future of River Red Gums in the Lake Cowal/Wilbertroy wetlands and along parts of the Lachlan looks bleak, adding to the approximately 80 per cent of wetlands across Australia already lost.



Neville Williams

30 October 2009