

Water is Life: Indigenous water knowledge and self-determination in Victoria, Australia

The Aboriginal Peoples of Australia are the oldest continuous culture in the world, having lived on our lands and cared for Country for over 60,000 years.

They are the traditional owners of all our lands and waters.

In spite of claims and actions by governments since 1788, Australia's aboriginal people have never ceded their legal and cultural rights to our lands and waters

**Water is Life: Traditional Owner Access to Water Roadmap", Government of Victoria, Australia (2022)*

"For tens of thousands of years, First Nations and Traditional Owners in Victoria (Australia) have practised their law and lore, customs and languages, and nurtured 'Country' through their spiritual, cultural, material and economic connections to land, water and (its) resources"

"First nations and Traditonal Owners hold the knowledge, stories, custodial obligations, and cultural expertise that has always ensured the health of waterways and river Country (and) hold the cultural authority to speak for water, rivers, and river Country within their traditional region"

"Greater use of traditional ecological knowledge ... in managing water will lead to healthy and thriving ecosystems. Increased water for economic development by Traditional Owners supports increased economic independence and nation-building with important well-being outcomes, increased autonomy and self-determination"

The "Water is Life" (2022) government policy roadmap provides self-determination for Traditional Owners (TO) in water use and management. Key policy outcomes for over the next 3-5 years include:

- Recognition of waterways and their surrounding lands as *living, integrated natural and cultural entities in law*, with TO recognised as a unique 'voice' of the living entities
- Recognition of TO as *waterway managers* for specific locations
- Recognition of TO as *environmental water holders*
- Water is returned to TO through the *issue of water entitlements*

In my part of Victoria, the **Djaara** people of the **Dja Dja Wurrung** nation have lived on their traditional lands and cared for ***djandak*** (Country) over many thousands of years.

New **Gatjin (water) Strategy** (2023) states:

"To exercise our rights, authority and apply Djaara lore to care for gatjin, we will achieve the following outcomes:"

- 1. Make decisions for gatjin based on Djaara culture and lore)*
- 2. Secure a growing share of water rights and entitlements restitution for stolen water rights and direct involvement in the 'water economy'*
- 3. Establish a Djaara Gatjin Authority to manage our water rights and entitlements and oversee water management decisions). Currently managed by **Djaara 'Water Knowledge Group'***