Talking fish

Making connections with the rivers of the Murray-Darling Basin

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Queensland content in association with Zafar Sarac and Greg Ringwood.

Citation: Frawley, J., Nichols, S., Goodall, H. and Baker, E. (2012) *Talking fish- making connections with the rivers of the Murray-Darling Basin*, Murray-Darling Basin Authority, Canberra.

ISBN 978-1-922068-56-9 (print), ISBN 978-1-922068-57-6 (online)

Published by the Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA), Canberra.

Research and editing by the NSW Department of Primary Industries (NSW DPI) and the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS). The views expressed in this booklet are not necessarily those of the NSW DPI, UTS or other project partners.

The MDBA acknowledges the intellectual property rights of the people whose stories are featured in this publication.

Note: The term *Talking Fish* is also being used by the Australian River Restoration Centre as a way of sharing knowledge about people's connection to fish and waterways.

Readers are warned that this publication may contain the names and images of Aboriginal people who have since passed away.

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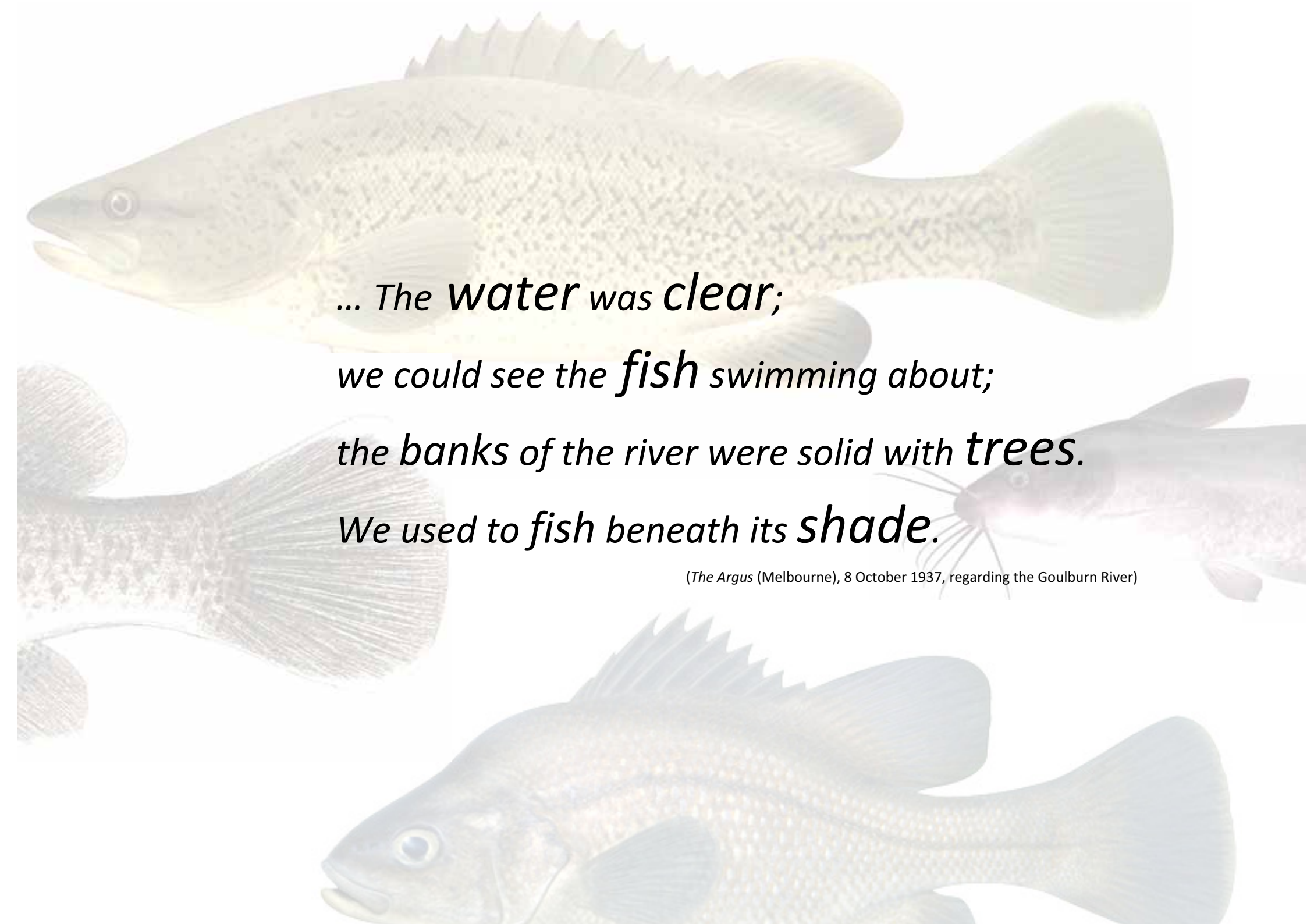
Abbreviations

DPI	Department of Primary Industries
PIRSA	Primary Industries and Resources SA
DENR	Department for Environment and Natural Resources (SA)
SARDI	SA Research and Development Institute
LAP	Local Action Planning Association
MDBA	Murray-Darling Basin Authority
DSE	Department of Sustainability and Environment (VIC)



… The **water** *was* **clear**;

we could see the **fish** *swimming about;*

the **banks** *of the river were solid with* **trees**.

We used to **fish** *beneath its* **shade**.

(*The Argus* (Melbourne), 8 October 1937, regarding the Goulburn River)

Acknowledgements

A very special thank you to all those people who participated by sharing their stories and photographs and to historical societies and libraries for providing assistance and materials.

Coorong and Lower Lakes

Participants: Brian Schulz, Terry Sim, John Yelland, Tracy and Glenn Hill, Garry Hera-Singh, Henry Jones, Sally Grundy and Dean Tugwell.
Advice and field support: Virginia Simpson, Phil Duncan (Ngnulu Consulting), Jonathan McPhail.

Katarapko

Participants: Howard Hendrick, Barry Porter, Tracy Bye, Kingsley Abdulla, Todd Goodman, Malcolm Wilksch, Gilli and Gladys Stoneham and Peter Teakle.
Advice and field support: Virginia Simpson (Rural Solutions SA), Phil Duncan (Ngnulu Consulting), Jonathan McPhail (PIRSA).

Lower Darling and the Great Anabranch

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Advice and field support: Phil Duncan (Ngnulu Consulting).

Murray

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Advice and field support: Phil Duncan (Ngnulu Consulting), Dr Wayne Atkinson, Charlie Carruthers.

Goulburn

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Advice and field support: Phil Duncan (Ngnulu Consulting), Fern Hames (Vic DSE), Pam Clunie (Vic DSE), Steve Saddlier (Vic DSE).

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Advice and field support: Luke Johnston (ACT), Phil Duncan (Ngnulu Consulting), Charlie Carruthers (NSW DPI).

Namoi

Participants: Joe and Pearl Trindall, Eric and Carol Hannan, Spider Cunningham, Jason Simpson, Robert Horne, Tim and Mandy Gavin, Doug and Jacqui Jamieson and Darcy Harris. Thanks also to Helen and Gordon Cain.
Advice and field support: Phil Duncan (Ngnulu Consulting), Milly Hobson (NSW DPI), Anthony Townsend (NSW DPI).

Upper Darling: Brewarrina to Bourke

Participants: Gordon Brown, Phil Sullivan, Phillip Parnaby, Dwayne Willoughby, Feli McHughes, Mick and Barb Davis, Alma-Jean Sullivan, Cathy Simpson, Keith Coleman, Max Jeffrey, Brad Steadman and Joe Flick.
Advice and field support: Phil Duncan (Ngnulu Consulting), David Cordina, (NSW DPI), Anthony Townsend (NSW DPI).

Paroo

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Advice and field support: Hamish Sewell (The Story Project), Greg Ringwood (Fisheries Queensland).

Culgoa - Balonne

Participants: Ned and Lynette Underwood, Roy and June Barker, Keith Codrington, George Thomas, Robert (Bob) Worboys, Rory Treweeke, Margaret and Peter Peterson, Robert Lacey, Michael Anderson, Pat Stephens and Pat Cross.
Advice and field support: Hamish Sewell (The Story Project), Greg Ringwood (Fisheries Queensland).

Upper Condamine

Participants: Sam Bonner, Noal Kuhl, Brian Kuhn, Dessie Obst, Geoff Reilly and Olive and Ray Shooter.
Advice and field support: Hamish Sewell (The Story Project), Greg Ringwood (Fisheries Queensland).

The rivers of the Murray-Darling Basin

The rivers and creeks of the Murray-Darling Basin flow through Queensland, New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory, Victoria and South Australia. The 77 000km of waterways that make up the Basin link 23 catchments over an area of 1 million km^2.

Each river has its own character yet these waters, the fish, the plants and the people that rely on them are all different.

The chapters in this book are about how the rivers, fish and fishing have changed. The main stories are written from oral history interviews conducted with local fishers in 2010-11, and relate individuals' memories of how their local places have changed. They showcase three ways of knowing a river: personal experience, scientific research and historical research.

Just as individual fishers do not always agree with one another, so their understanding might not necessarily agree with current scientific information or historical records. Similarly, specific items and events might be remembered differently by different people. These varied perspectives show the range in views about fishing and the rivers, each important in its own way.

There are many other great stories out there about fishing in the Murray-Darling Basin. These are just the beginning.

Figure 1: The catchments of the Murray-Darling Basin.

Contents

1. Introduction

Annie and Jack Koolmatrie learnt to fish in the Coorong and Lower Lakes of the Murray River where they were born in the 1910s.[1] They travelled up and down the Murray River, picking fruit, working on farms and camping with other Ngarrindjeri families beside one of the many creeks or wetlands.

As they fished around the river, lakes, wetlands and creeks they observed the habits of fish and the places that they lived, learning from their parents and grandparents as they went. By watching the movement of the reeds and water plants, they learnt to spot the giant Murray cod whose tail would break the surface of the water as it was feeding. Jack ran nets for mullet and congolli with his grandfather in the Coorong and at the end of a day's fishing they would sing songs for the Ngarrindjeri Sea-Country. Together they fished for food, fun and recreation.

Another life lived on the river is Jack Ryan's, who learnt to fish in Victoria in the 1880s.[2] He trekked around the streams and rivers in his spare time, experimenting and observing the habits of fish and the places they lived.

He had what he called 'blank days' when he caught no fish and others when he bought home loads of fish to share with his family and friends. By the time he mastered the art of angling he knew that to catch the illusive Blackfish, the now rare Macquarie Perch, he needed to use the common earthworm or the little green mud-eyes to tempt this shy fish out of hiding.

By fishing in all seasons, he learnt about the thunderstorms and floods and how there was a distinct window that would mean he could bring home a sugar bag full. If the water was a little churned up one of Jack's favourite fish would come out in shoals. But the conditions had to be exactly right - when a fresh came and the waters muddied - not when the flood was raging, nor when it was receding.

Having spent years fishing alone and learning to read the river Jack joined the local Angling club. By 1909 he had won ten gold medals and fifteen first prizes. As an older man, he took the time to teach young fishers what he knew about fishing and fish, and the rivers they depended on.

Fishing a river – it's about family and cultural traditions, catching food, relaxation and sport. This photo shows Alma-Jean Sullivan fishing near Bourke, NSW. Photo: Photo: Philip Sullivan.

Many people have fond memories of fishing as children.
Photo source: John Douglass.

This book is about people, like Jack and Annie Koolmatrie and Jack Ryan, who live alongside and fish the rivers of the Murray-Darling Basin. It tells part of the story about the people, fish and rivers of the Basin and how they interact and influence each other. It's about how rivers, fish and fishing have changed and about how people are working to bring the rivers back to life.

Each chapter in this book captures some of the observations and the memories of fishers across the Murray-Darling Basin. It also draws on other types of records, including historical accounts and scientific studies to provide both context and insights into the changing health of the rivers and their fish.

Catch and release fishing is one of the changes to fishing that people talked about. Photo source: Jason Simpson.

The Basin

The Murray-Darling Basin is an iconic feature of the Australian landscape. It covers an eighth of the continent, crossing the borders of five states or territories. It is made up of twenty-three river valleys, each with tributaries, billabongs, backwaters, creeks and wetlands. There are Alpine streams that freeze solid every year, ephemeral desert rivers that might not flow at all for years at a time as well as rivers with deep and wide channels carrying thousands of megalitres of water a day.

This complexity of shape and flow provides many different habitats. Our native fish evolved to use these habitats and flourish with the natural extremes of drought and flood.

Despite all its diversity, the Murray-Darling Basin is a connected whole where events and changes in one area can have devastating consequences on rivers, fish and people downstream.

Past stories tell of clear water and vast shoals of fish, such as recorded in Thomas Mitchell's diary in 1835 while on the Darling River:[3]

> *The water being beautifully transparent, the bottom was visible at great depths, showing large fishes in shoals, floating like birds in mid-air.*

We don't see this now.

Many things, from the over-allocation of water resources, poor land management planning and the expansion of primary production, have contributed to a decline in river health.

What we see now is a Basin that has only one-tenth of the fish that it once had.

One fish that people have noticed decline across the Basin is the eel-tailed catfish. This is one of the many fish that fishers remembered as being more plentiful before dams were built, widespread intensive agriculture or the arrival of carp. They also remember freshwater mussels, water snails and other small creatures that they don't see anymore.

Silver perch were once common across the Basin.
Photo: Fisheries Victoria.

Stories relating to twelve rivers across the Basin are profiled in this book. The chapter number is shown in brackets. Moving upstream, the stories start in South Australia: the Coorong and Lower Lakes (2), where it all meets the Southern Ocean, and Katarapko Creek in the Riverland (3).

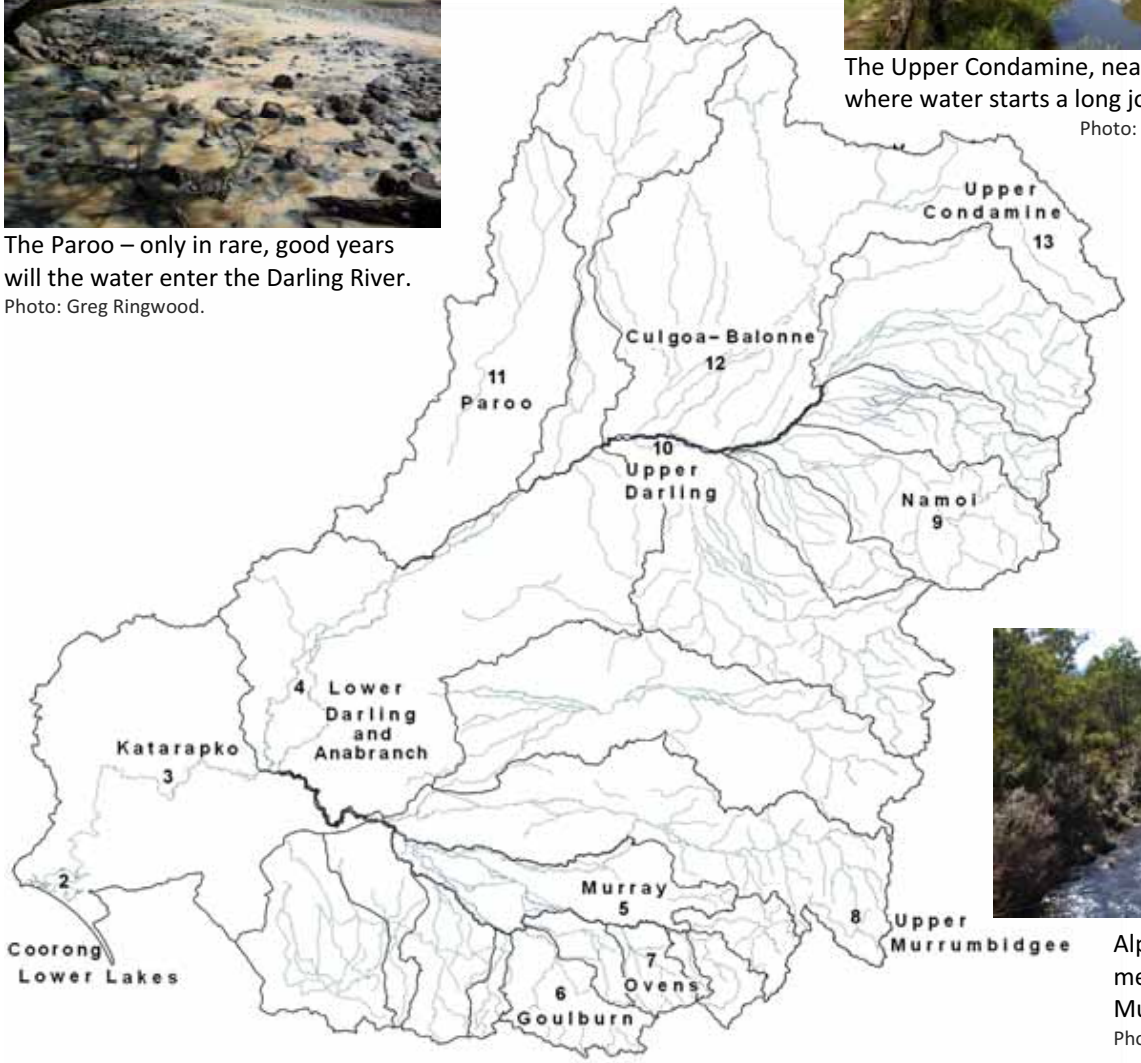
Crossing the border into New South Wales: the Lower Darling and the Great Anabranch (4) and the mainstem of the Murray River between Corowa and Echuca (5), part of the border between Victoria and New South Wales. Into Victoria: the Goulburn (6) and the Ovens (7). Then back into NSW: Upper Murrumbidgee (8), Namoi (9) and the Upper Darling between Brewarrina and Bourke (10).

North west to the Paroo (11) in Queensland, then east to the Culgoa-Balonne (12) and the Upper Condamine (13).

Where the waters of the Murray-Darling meet the sea: the Coorong, where the stories in this book start. Photo: Jodi Frawley.

The Paroo – only in rare, good years will the water enter the Darling River.
Photo: Greg Ringwood.

The Upper Condamine, near Warwick, Queensland, where water starts a long journey to the sea.
Photo: Greg Ringwood.



Alpine streams add snow melt to the waters of the Murrumbidgee.
Photo: Charlie Carruthers.

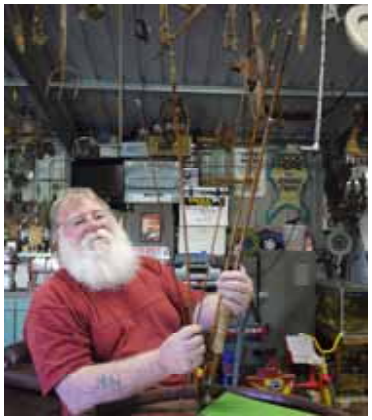
Fishing

Fishing has always been a common activity for people who live in the Murray-Darling Basin. In some families there are generations who have spent time next to a river, watching it, fishing and enjoying being outside, in nature. Hours spent comfortably alone or with family and friends, being taught to fish, fishing and teaching in turn. For the Aboriginal peoples of the Basin, the rivers, fish and fishing are an integral part of who they are and their culture.

Whether fishing for relaxation, for food or as a social activity, fishers have experienced change in their rivers and the fish they catch. Some know what they catch is different from what their grandparents caught. People new to the Basin or to fishing might not realize that what they see now is not what the rivers were, nor what they could be.

People featured in this book are among those who want to see the rivers healthy and the fish flourishing once more. Their visions of what the rivers could be and their descriptions of the sorts of things they are doing are part of the rich story of fishing throughout the Basin.

Pearl and Joe Trindall, with their nephew Phil (centre). Photo: Jodi Frawley



Donny Richter. Photo: Jodi Frawley

John Aston. Photo source: John Aston

The fishers you will meet in this book come from all walks of life. They share their memories of fishing and of the changes they have seen in the many and varied parts of the Murray-Darling Basin.

These fishers are among the 430,000 who fish the waters of the Basin.[4] Some fish for relaxation and some for food. Others fish or fished commercially. For some, fishing is part of who they are. Over their lives, the reasons for fishing might have changed, and what was once a food-on-the-table necessity has become a recreation. This book includes people who fish for many different reasons and covers a range of perspectives.

For Aboriginal peoples throughout the Basin, fishing has remained a central part of community life.[5,6] The location of many of the missions and reserves on or near rivers enabled Aboriginal people to supplement the meagre diets and rations of the postcolonial era. Fishing is also part of continuing traditional interactions with country and riverbanks remain important places for gathering and storytelling.

Growing up fishing

Growing up fishing is an important part of many fishers' stories. In Aboriginal communities, this has largely been because of the enduring role of women as fishers for food, accompanied by children and teaching them Country in the process.[7,8,9]

In non-Aboriginal communities, women often had the strongest memories of fishing during the years when their children were young. The river was a cool and enjoyable place to take children to play in the heat of summer, to learn to swim and to fish. During this time in women's lives, their relationship with the river and fishing was intense, but as their children grew then their relationship to fishing also changed.[10]

Growing up fishing led some of these children to take up careers that kept them close to the rivers, either as commercial fishers in the Coorong and other areas, or as scientists studying fish or ecology or conservation.

Work and the rivers

Working on or near rivers contributed a lot to people's knowledge of rivers and of their fish … as well as providing many different opportunities to go fishing!

Working with stock around the Paroo River meant sometimes meant 'droving' by boat! During the floods in 1935 and 1936 drovers had to use boats hauled by hand across the river to get stock to safety. Knowing when and how the rivers flooded was an integral part of living and working around these rivers. Photo source: Colin Leigo.

For some like Joe and Pearl Trindall, droving stock for months at a time meant getting to know the rivers and the floodplains so they could keep the stock healthy and have fish for dinner. As a young married couple in the 1940s they learnt how, where and when water flowed, during drought and flood.

The Trindall's main observation now, comparing the Namoi river system today with the experiences they had as young drovers, is that there is far less water available.

The Namoi is also one of the many rivers that have had snags removed – to improve navigation and as a misguided attempt to improve water flow. Previously this was accepted practice and resnagging was considered heresy. But many fishers, like Bryan Pratt whose story is in the Murrumbidgee, know that snags are a good place to catch fish - he says:

> *we knew snags were important because when you go fishing for Murray cod … you home in on the snags. That's where the fish are.*

A Murray cod at home amongst the snags. The majority of Murray cod are found within one metre of a snag. Photo: Craig Copeland.

J.O Langtry was both a fisher and a scientist. He says that over the two years working as a biologist in 1948-49 he learnt a lot as he talked to anyone who fished – whether they did it as a hobby, for a living or as a poacher.

They were all for him a source of knowledge about the river and how it was changing. In particular, he stressed that as a scientist, he learned most about fish because he DID the fishing. As he explained, emphasising some things very strongly:[11]

> *So, the thing about it is not just to go and LOOK at the river, it's to go and WORK it. To handle it, to DO it! It's the only way.*

How people fished has changed over the decades. Many of the fishers profiled here talked about how they, and others, have changed the gear they use, the techniques and their overall approach.

Handing down the stories

Although the collective memory of the people interviewed did not reach further back than the 1930s, in some instances people told stories handed down from generation to generation.

In more recent times, one of the key changes identified by fishers is that there has been a shift in attitudes from 'taking it all' to 'catch and release'. Where once it was common and unremarkable to catch huge hauls of fish, this practice is now frowned upon by most fishers, whether they fish the Upper Condamine at the top of the system or Lake Alexandrina, right down near the mouth.

Tethering (top) was once commonplace and common sense in an age when many fished for food and before refrigeration. Catch and release (below) has become much more the usual since the late twentieth century and tethering is frowned upon. Photo, top: NSW DPI. Photo source, below: Barry Porter.

While the techniques have changed, fishing remains an important aspect of family and community life. Most people we spoke to learnt to fish as part of the life of the family.

What was surprising was that mostly it was not their mothers or fathers who taught them to fish. Instead, they learnt alongside cousins and siblings from other members of their extended families: uncles and aunts and grandparents. For some fishers, grandparents now themselves, the opportunity to teach their grandchildren to be responsible fishers is both welcome and taken seriously.

Colin Green and his grandson, Blake. Fishing is a part of family life. Photo source: Colin Green.

Part of who we are

Aboriginal communities in the Murray-Darling Basin have related but slightly different experiences of familial relations and extended family. Fishing and trips to the river are interwoven with storytelling and learning their culture and interactions between elders and youngsters. Riverbanks are places where creation stories were retold and children are introduced into Aboriginal ways and responsibilities for Place.

This idea of being responsible for the river and its fish is an important one for many Aboriginal people. Feli McHughes, one of our interviewees, has said about the Brewarrina Ngemba Billabong, on the Upper Darling River:[12]

> *Our billabong is significant to our culture, our well-being, our value, Baiame's healing, Australia's reconciliation healing, Australia's environment, Australia's conservation and restoration.*

The rehabilitation of a place like the Brewarrina Billabong will benefit the community and the fish, plants and other living things that live in the billabong itself and all the waterways it's connected to.

Top: Fish traps, Brewarrina. Photo: Philip Sullivan.
Middle: Alma Jean Sullivan, a renowned local fisher. Photo: Philip Sullivan.
Bottom: Ngemba Billabong. Photo: Feli McHughes.

Carp

One of the stories that will be handed down to generations to come is the arrival of carp.

Some of the fishers interviewed could remember rivers before carp and have vivid memories of their arrival. Others have never known a river without them. Several fishers observed that the carp do well because the river system has changed with the building of dams and weirs, increased siltation and less variable cycles of dry and flood. They also see how carp contribute to these changes, through their feeding habits and competition with native fish.

Most lament the introduction of carp, and some like Dougie McGregor from the Paroo would be happy to see those responsible 'shot'. Others have learnt to use them in various ways. Baarkantji woman Jenny Whyman recalls how she was taught a recipe for pickled carp from her Yugoslav uncle.

Large congregations of carp can be common after floods. Nathan Reynoldson.

The feelings about other introduced fish are more ambiguous. Trout fishing has a long history in Europe and North America. These fish were introduced into Australia to provide a familiar sport fishing experience for European migrants. In particular, fly-fishing for trout was enjoyed by middle and upper class and were the focus for the first fishing clubs and tournaments in Australia. It was believed that native fish were decidedly not sporting fish. This started to change in the mid-twentieth century and now lure and fly-fishers will regularly target native species.

Bill Austin giving would-be fly fishers a distance casting demonstration at Eildon in 1945. He is handling 30 yards of line with an Australian-made cane rod. Photo source: Mick Hall.

Trout and other species like redfin, roach and tench have always been seen as good eating fish and there are many people who lament the decline of redfin from the 1980s onwards.

New stories

Whether it's catfish or carp, catch-and-release or set lines, the regulation of flows or not, the people we spoke to told stories of changes to rivers and to the type and numbers of fish. If we reflect on 150 years of change, can we imagine a Darling River clear to a depth of 30 feet? A Murray River with tens of thousands more snags, each with a Murray cod or a trout cod nearby? A Coorong teeming with mulloway, flounder and congolli?

There are fishers who remember the rivers differently than they are today. These are their stories.

Top: Allowidgee, pictured fishing using a bark canoe and reed spear in a way common to Yorta Yorta men, Photo source: State Library of South Australia, SLSA: PRG 422/3/704.
Middle: Fly fishing. Photo source: Jim Hanley.
Bottom: the next generation. Photo: NSW DPI.

The *Talking Fish* project

The *Talking Fish* project arose from an increasing realisation that many different groups of people, including fishers, Indigenous communities, tourists and landholders have developed unique relationships with the rivers of the Murray-Darling Basin. There is also the growing recognition that the health of the Murray-Darling Basin is at risk.

By accessing and recording different people's stories about their experiences of a river, its fish and how both have changed will contribute to our collective knowledge and help shape future management decisions. These stories also have the potential to give people a sense of just what these magnificent rivers and their fish were once like - and could be again with ongoing rehabilitation efforts.

The *Talking Fish* project focussed on 12 reaches within the following rivers: Namoi (NSW), Upper Condamine River (Qld), Katarapko Creek (SA), Upper Murrumbidgee River (NSW / ACT), Culgoa - Balonne Rivers (Qld / NSW), Paroo River (Qld), Goulburn River (Vic), Lower Darling River and the Great Anabranch (NSW), Ovens River (Vic), Mainstem Murray River (NSW / Victoria), Upper Darling River (NSW) and The Coorong and Lower Lakes (SA).

The *Talking Fish* project is a starting point to share local knowledge and learned experience with others to improve the health of the Murray-Darling Basin. Project information is available at: www.mdba.gov.au and www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/fisheries/habitat.

Aboriginal names usage note
The attempts of early European settlers to translate the names of Aboriginal nations and language groups into English led to variations in how these names were spelt. Local Aboriginal people often prefer particular spellings. Where an interviewee has a preference, this is used in their profile.

Many special people contributed to the stories in this book and are listed in the Acknowledgements. Some were profiled and others were not, but all contributed stories and photographs. Some of the people who weren't profiled are shown here.
From left to right, starting at the top row: Ken Strachan, Graham Ellis, Peter Stid (Murray); Robert Horne (Namoi); Robert Lacey (Culgoa-Balonne); Tim Gavin (Namoi); Bill Grace (Lower Darling); Pat Larkin (Ovens); Geoff Reilly (Condamine); Trish Johnson (Lower Darling); Gill Stoneham (Katarapko); Doug and Jacqui Jamieson (Namoi); Unc and Max Jeffrey (Upper Darling); Gary Sharpe (Ovens); Jim Hanley, Don Collihole, Jeff Vernon, Keith Jones (Goulburn); Mick and Barb Davis (Upper Darling).