

**Submission
No 468**

**INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF PUBLIC LAND IN
NEW SOUTH WALES**

Organisation: Yarkuwa Indigenous Knowledge Centre

Name: Mr David Crew

Date received: 31/08/2012

My name is David Crew. I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, the Wamba Wamba and Perrepa Perrepa Nations, and pay my respects to Elders past, present and future. I am the manager of the Yarkuwa Indigenous Knowledge Centre Aboriginal Corporation, which was established in 2003 to hold and maintain traditional knowledge relating to culture and heritage, family and kinship information and to provide a basis of community development.

We have maintained a role in that as well as managing the local area through funding from various sources, including the New South Wales Environmental Trust and consultancy services. In 2009 we began negotiations with the New South Wales State Forests and the Federal Government for the Indigenous Protected Area Program to consider new management options for part of the Werai group of forests. As part of the Government's review of the red gum forests, we prepared a submission based on our experience as an organisation and the knowledge of our members and their families.

For this inquiry, our information relates to the Werai reserve and to the Murray Valley Regional Park. Both areas contain important cultural and environmental resources with over 200 cultural locations found in the Werai reserve, including six major burial grounds. Throughout the process, Yarkuwa has advocated for a partnership approach that continues the process of community strength building and community development. We maintain that the health of the environment has a direct connection to the health and wellbeing of our community. Access to resources, including food and medicine, are critical in working to close the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities.

With relation to our experiences since the transfer of Werai and the Murray Valley Regional Park, I would like to mention the important work being undertaken by both the New South Wales and Federal Governments to achieve a positive result for our community, which includes the support for the Werai Aboriginal Negotiating Team, the partnership work with the Murray Catchment Management Authority and the continuing support of the Commonwealth Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities through the Indigenous Protected Area Program.

However there are points that we feel should be recognised by this inquiry. The process of engagement with traditional owners largely has been in response to initiatives from the community and not from government. There does not seem to be a priority process for the development of comprehensive management plans that fully engage with local traditional owners. While traditional owners through the negotiating team endorsed a general work plan for Werai presented by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, there has been no involvement of community members in the implementation of this work plan to date.

There are a number of current initiatives that have been identified, including the establishment of an Indigenous Green Team that could work on public and private lands in the Deniliquin area. This initiative aligns with the current 2021 State Plan. This initiative is also supported by the Murray Catchment Management Authority through investment and through the Caring for Our Country for seed funding. However, until we get tangible support from New South Wales National Parks and TAFE NSW we cannot proceed to establish the team. There is also an issue regarding compliance, particularly in relation to the illegal collection of firewood. Our members do not know if this is being effectively monitored.

We continue to believe that while the main issues surrounding river red gums and their management can be identified, we should not do this without identifying the opportunities that can be developed. As an Aboriginal corporation, we are necessarily primarily concerned with the benefits that can come to our members. While we acknowledge the values of these areas to other members of the community, we believe that the traditional owners of the local area are yet to see any benefits from the current management system. I quote from one traditional owner:

These forests were our economic base for thousands of years and now provide no economic return for my people, while at the same time making many non-Aboriginal people wealthy. My people's spiritual and religious connection to country is directly linked to, and cannot be separated from, the environment.

Those words were spoken almost three years ago, and we continue to wait for them to be heard. However, we remain convinced that benefits can come, if we find a way to work collaboratively and in partnership. There are two final matters. The Australian National Audit Office 2012 report on Indigenous Protected Areas [IPA] stated:

The Indigenous Protected Areas (IPA) program was implemented in 1997 as a vehicle to support Indigenous land management and to increase the size of the [national reserve system] ... and improve its comprehensiveness, adequacy and representativeness. As at June 2011, the IPA program had contributed 25.95 million hectares [of land]—more than half the contribution to the [national reserve system] in this period.

In 2010 Dr Janet Hunt from the Australian National University's Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy in her research highlighted the challenges facing Aboriginal people working in this area. She states:

... achieving benefits for Aboriginal people involves a close relationship between cultural and natural resources management and conservation agencies, education authorities and employment policy and programs. All these have to work together to gain the most from available resources and opportunities. At present, it is Aboriginal people on the ground who have to make these things come together, rather than a concerted government coordination strategy.

In New South Wales, there is not a total lack of support from other State departments. The issue is that coordination of all the necessary arrangements has to be done by the Aboriginal organisations themselves, and this can be complex. Furthermore, there has to be capacity for partnership development and maintenance in each of the partners. At this point, this seems very dependent on the commitment, skills and qualities of particular individuals, both in the Aboriginal organisations and the agencies with whom they partner. In conclusion, Yarkuwa remains committed to working with all levels of government to improve outcomes for our community.

My name is Debbie Flower I am a traditional owner and identify as a Wamba Wamba woman. I am a member of Yarkuwa Indigenous Knowledge Centre Aboriginal Corporation. My family comes from the Werai Forest and also lived on the flats on the northern side of the Edward River in Deniliquin. When I heard the decision that the Werai groups of forests were going to be handed back to my people, I held high hopes that I would see justice done and that my community could once again take responsibility for looking after country. I would like to present to you a map that we call the "hodgepodge map". This is a collection of more than 10,000 locations identified by my community as places where they practise their culture in the Werai Forest today.

It took some time, but in May 2011 we were able to bring together almost 150 traditional owners with connection to the Werai area. This was an amazing experience and may have been the first time for generations that such a gathering had taken place. From that meeting, a negotiating team was created to work with the New South Wales Government to work out how to transfer ownership to an Aboriginal title-holding body. Since that time the committee has met only four times.

I believe that we have raised the expectations for our community. We can see the benefits that this transfer can bring. We can see that it will be part of our children's future. What we cannot see yet is a commitment from our government agencies to really invest in making this happen. I believe that a strong commitment could be shown by a strong partnership approach that builds connections between government and community.

Recommendations for future Management of Werai Reserve and Murray Valley Regional Park

That the NSW Government;

- 1. Continues supporting the process for transfer of the Werai Reserve to an Aboriginal Title Holding Body through the Werai Aboriginal Negotiating Team. This must include retaining Native Title in any transfer.*
- 2. Increases engagement with local traditional owners through supporting the development of the Wamba Wamba Aboriginal Green Team. This support should be whole of government including the Office of Environment and Heritage, Aboriginal Affairs NSW, Department of Education and Training and Murray Catchment Management Authority.*
- 3. Undertakes regular assessment of the impact of this work on the wellbeing of local traditional owners. Members of our community felt frustrated and concerned that the process is taking too long.*
- 4. Involves local traditional owners in developing capacity to manage compliance particularly relating to unregulated wood removal from Werai.*
- 5. Establishes a process for community firewood collection before March 2013*
- 6. Reviews community access issues and facilitate traditional owner access to country*
- 7. Commits relevant government staff to contribute to local capacity building of traditional owners through information workshops and training*
- 8. Commits to developing effective partnerships with local traditional owner organisations to provide confidence in the process of title transfer and management of Werai Reserve.*