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Future Drought Fund

SA DROUGHT HUB

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Ngarrindjeri Climate Yarning Circles

LEAD ORGANISATION: Ngarrindjeri Aboriginal Corporation (NAC)

PARTNER ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED: Murraylands and Riverland Landscape Board (MRLB), South Australian Research and Development Institute (SARDI)

SA DROUGHT HUB NODE: Loxton

Outcomes

Short term

- Co-design and participatory approaches embedded in the design and delivery of Hub activities.
- Efficient and effective activities to support research, development, extension, adoption and commercialisation (RDEA&C) and uptake by end users.

Medium term

- Increased availability and accessibility of, and capacity to use and adopt, knowledge that can be applied to improve drought resilience.
- Design and delivery of Hub activities is responsive to end-user needs.

Hub-specific

- Increased capacity, preparedness and transition of users towards a future climate with less rainfall.

Introduction

Yarning Circles are a culturally appropriate knowledge-sharing forum for the Ngarrindjeri people, the Traditional Owners of the Lower Lakes, Murray Mouth, Coorong and lower River Murray in South Australia.

From May to June 2023, Yarning Circles focused on climate change impacts on Ngarrindjeri Yarluwar-Ruwe (lands and waters) were held in Meningie, Strathalbyn and Murray Bridge as part of the NAC-led *Building the resilience of Ngarrindjeri Yarluwar-Ruwe* Landscape Priority Fund (LPF) project.

Project outcomes

The Yarning Circles facilitated a dialogue that bridged cultural knowledge with scientific insights, enabling the Ngarrindjeri community to articulate a clear stance on climate change, focusing on actionable mitigation and adaptation strategies that respect and incorporate Ngarrindjeri cultural values.

Significant outcomes include:

- enhanced understanding of climate change impacts on traditional lands and waters
- insights into how Ngarrindjeri cultural practices can mitigate the impacts of climate change
- a framework for integrating scientific and First Nations knowledge.

By identifying major concerns and knowledge gaps, dialogue guided the LPF project and spun off several others, including:

- investigating freshwater soaks along the Coorong
- Ngarrindjeri involvement in monitoring and managing important species such as Thukubi (freshwater turtles)
- development of a baseline seasonal calendar that can be used to track climate-related changes.

Specific actions included the development of a carbon-neutral stance for NAC and advocacy for sustainable water management practices.

In engaging a broad range of community members, from Elders to school-age children, the Yarning Circles also supported the intergenerational transmission of knowledge crucial for long-term cultural and environmental sustainability.

The project has set a precedent for community-led climate resilience initiatives and offers a model for other First Nations communities facing similar challenges.

Ngarrindjeri Aboriginal Corporation

We wanted to bring together the whole community from across the Ngarrindjeri Nation to discuss what climate change and future scenarios might mean. And it was about much more than the next 5 to 10 years; we wanted to think about the generations ahead.



Photo: Jem Tesoriero, MRLB.

Tyreen Gollan monitoring Thukubi, a culturally significant species identified at the Yarning Circles as being at risk from climate change.

A lot of the community are not part of the mainstream climate debate. Yarning Circles gave them a chance to be part of the discussion and to both give and receive knowledge. The process gave people agency to not only engage, but also contribute to the management of the problem. It also put Ngarrindjeri traditional knowledge on an even footing with science in addressing climate challenges.

Because of where Ngarrindjeri are, we're vulnerable to climate change from multiple directions. We're at the bottom of the river system – whatever affects the river upstream, affects us. Changes in sea level will affect the Coorong, ocean beaches and lakes. Ngarrindjeri rely on water coming off the Mt Lofty ranges – if the ranges are affected, that affects us. But Ngarrindjeri people can't just up and move, our culture can't up and move, the environment that's part of our culture can't up and move.

The millennium drought was remembered as a time when the water stopped flowing, and nobody was prepared for it. The Yarning Circles highlighted that when things go wrong, there are huge knock-on effects. Ngarrindjeri recognise the importance of responding quickly, and these conversations were an opportunity to get on the front foot before things become extreme again.

The before and after of the Yarning Circles has been important. It's about taking our community on the journey of what to expect from the impacts of climate change on a society – culturally, economically, environmentally.

Dr Peter Hayman

Principal Scientist, Climate Applications, SARDI



When I talk to farmers about climate, they have deeply lived memories that extend back generations, sometimes to droughts that occurred 100 years ago. The Ngarrindjeri people have stories about sea levels rising 18,000 years ago.

That oral history is part of a continuous cultural experience that has been passed down over millennia.

In agriculture, we talk about things like the wine industry moving to a wetter, cooler region. Although that sort of thinking undervalues rural communities' sense of place, in terms of economic production there's a sense that you can simply shift location. But place isn't just where you conduct your economic activity; it's your identity.

When you talk about the Ngarrindjeri Nation, there's nowhere for them to move to – the lower lakes and the Coorong, this is who they are. The idea that you can find somewhere else is nonsense.

Ngarrindjeri have a deep understanding of ecology, which informs their cultural practices. They've seen the timing of seasonal events shift with the climate – collecting swan eggs, when plants are fruiting, for example. They're responding to ensure these practices aren't lost, and the Yarning Circles elevated these considerations.

It was also a privilege to connect with Tim Hartman from NAC, Candice Love and Jem Tesoriero of MRLB, and Dr Ben Taylor at Nature Glenelg Trust – their generosity made such an enriching experience possible.

It's been fantastic working with NAC, the Ngarrindjeri community and the SA Drought Hub on the Climate Yarning Circles. The project has added enormous value and strategic direction to our ongoing work with NAC, and has deepened our understanding of the impacts of climate change on our region and communities. The hub's support has been critical to the success of the project and we look forward to continuing this partnership.
Jem Tesoriero, Murraylands and Riverland Landscape Board

MORE INFORMATION

A video and report showcasing the project are available via the SA Drought Hub website. Contact Tony Randall, SA Drought Hub, at tony@agex.org.au for further details.

NGARRINDJERI ABORIGINAL CORPORATION

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Government of South Australia
Department of Primary Industries and Regions

SARDI
SOUTH AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE

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