

Indigenous Engagement in Victoria

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'An Aboriginal man was given the honour of returning skeletal remains of an Indigenous ancestor to the original burial site known to be a limestone cave in Gippsland, Victoria. This was the first time the man had been in contact with human remains, and he was overwhelmed by the enormous responsibility that had been bestowed upon him.

After entering the cave, the man struggled to find a suitable resting place for the deceased. As he unwrapped the skeletal remains from the plastic covering, a blowfly came to rest on the bones. Immediately he recognised there was a spiritual connection, and he asked the blowfly to guide him. At that moment the blowfly flew across the cave and landed on a shelf. The man knew instantly that this was a sign, so he proceeded to lay the remains onto a bark stretcher, which he later carefully placed on the shelf. All the while, the blowfly remained in the same position on the shelf, alongside the remains of the ancestor. After paying his respects, the man climbed out of the cave and closed up the entrance.'

The story of the blowfly demonstrates the strong connection that Aboriginals have with Country, which they have maintained for thousands of years. Indigenous peoples look upon the land as their mother because from it derives everything they need to survive. The waterways, for example, are the lifeline of Indigenous people, and the fish, swans, ducks and reeds are all life sustaining sources of food. Indigenous peoples travel the waterways throughout Country and write songs about their travels. This interconnection between humanity and environment, as a holistic entity, is the essence of Indigenous peoples' culture, spirituality and life.

In just over 200 years since European occupation, there have been many events, policies and legislation that have impacted severely upon Indigenous peoples across the State and their ability to practice their culture. Not surprisingly, relationships between Indigenous and other Australians have been adversely affected by these activities.

The primary objectives of this paper are twofold:

- (i) to present an overview of the current status of Indigenous engagement in NRM in Victoria; and
- (ii) to provide advice on how Indigenous engagement within the catchment management framework in Victoria can be improved.

In Victoria, the concept of integrated catchment management underpins sustainable management of land and water resources and contributes to

biodiversity management. Victoria has a strong integrated catchment management framework established under *the Catchment and Land Protection Act 1994 (CaLP Act)*. Under the *CaLP Act*, Victoria is divided into ten catchment regions.

At the statewide level, the framework also includes the Victorian Catchment Management Council (VCMC). The VCMC is the State Government's peak advisory body on catchment management. The Council is uniquely placed, independent of government agencies, to take a long-term view and to influence change in catchment management, including indigenous engagement.

The concept of 'speaking for Country' is a fundamental principle adopted by Traditional Owners. It is broadly recognised that Aboriginal law authorises traditional owners to speak for Country.

It is important to engage with Traditional Owners on their own terms. Too often a member of a Traditional Owner group (who is known to be approachable) is approached/ambushed and asked his/her view. Rather, it should be at the discretion of the Traditional Owner group to determine the appropriate method for providing feedback, comments or informed consent. This may be through a person being authorised to speak, or it may be through a Council of Elders, family group, etc.

While it is recommended to engage with Traditional Owners first and foremost, it is important to aim for holistic involvement and consult with the wider Indigenous community who may also have an interest in a particular project/area.

On the reverse side of the coin, Indigenous people similarly feel confused about whom to approach at the organisational level and often see all government agencies/departments as the one body.

Although there have been some real successes and we are heading in the right direction, the reality is that we still have a long way to go. Engagement in the regions is often selective and fragmented, and there is still a lack of understanding and respect for Indigenous people and their cultural values.

The plethora of Indigenous strategies that have been developed in the past without true progress have resulted in cynicism within the regions about their worth. One CMA Officer, when informed about the review of the DSE Indigenous Partnership Strategy (2000) commented, "What's the point in undertaking a review of a document that has failed to produce any outcomes – what have we got to review?" Many people take the view that money spent on developing strategies would be better spent on tangible projects that have demonstrable benefits.

Protocols for Indigenous engagement in NRM are essentially guidelines on how to engage effectively on land and water issues. They provide direction on how to interact and work together while acknowledging ownership of Country and recognising and supporting the rights and responsibilities of all parties.

Protocols are not an end point in themselves, but rather the start of an ongoing process. Once signed, it is the responsibility of the signatories to the agreement to follow through with the implementation of the protocols, which requires continued effort and patience.

The majority of Indigenous participants involved in a recent study undertaken by the Victorian Catchment Management Council identified employment as the single most important issue they are facing. Time and time again, jobs that are being advertised are failing to attract any applications, and the few that do apply do not have the right skills or background to carry out the role.

There are probably several reasons for the poor uptake of Aboriginal people into such roles, but it is clear that the Indigenous community is not one you can “throw jobs at”. Indigenous people have been accustomed to high unemployment levels for generations, and the youth of today often see their lives taking a similar pathway to that of their parents and grandparents. This makes it difficult to motivate young people to go to school. Without any formal education, qualifications or training, a large proportion of the Aboriginal community are simply not ‘job ready’. At the moment we are still only dealing with ‘the tip of the iceberg’ where Indigenous employment is concerned. An integrated approach is required to realise opportunities for Indigenous employment in natural resource management. Not only does the government need to step up to the challenge and make a genuine long-term commitment to Indigenous recruitment, Indigenous peoples likewise need to actively seek out opportunities to prepare themselves for entering the workforce. This is a much-needed approach if we are ever going to break the cycle of unemployment.

The Landcare model of community decision making and participation welcomes all people, regardless of racial, political or social backgrounds, to become involved in land and water management activities.

Landcare offers a great opportunity for Indigenous people to equally participate in on-ground projects and activities and be involved in decision-making regarding the management of a particular site. Landcare provides a practical forum for Indigenous communities to share traditional knowledge and, in turn, learn about non-Indigenous approaches to managing the land. This leads to mutual respect and understanding.

All of the CMAs have appointed, or are in the process of appointing, an Indigenous facilitator to guide Indigenous activities at the regional level. This is a major step forward that has led to enhanced cross-cultural awareness and breaking down of barriers between CMAs, Aboriginal communities and the broader community. For example, the Glenelg Hopkins Indigenous Community Landcare Facilitator is involved in an innovative project to capture traditional stories from different parts of the region and develop them into an illustrated children's storybook. It is anticipated the storybook will lead to increased awareness of Indigenous heritage amongst the younger generation.

Government agencies, CMAs, Landcare groups and facilitators need to work harder to build awareness within Indigenous communities of funding programs so they can have access to the same opportunities as non-Indigenous people. CMAs, in particular, could act as a funding conduit for Indigenous communities and bring dollars into the region. These bodies could potentially become the biggest employers of Indigenous people at the regional level.

Above all, Government and other natural resource management agencies need to go beyond the rhetoric and act on their promises. This entails creating real opportunities for Indigenous people to become empowered as managers of our natural resources so that they can continue to practise their culture. Only when Indigenous policy and planning directions become a core function will we know that we have achieved our joint goal of true involvement.