A new water sharing plan is being developed for the Murray-Darling Basin which is to include the consideration of social, cultural, Indigenous and other public benefit issues.

Water holds great cultural and symbolic significance as well as economic importance in Aboriginal societies. Indigenous Australians hold legal rights to Australia’s inland waters. These include legislatively recognised rights for hunting, gathering, and fishing for personal, domestic, or non-commercial needs, and other public benefits.

The Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) is responsible for developing the Basin Plan, which will support the integrated management of the Basin’s water resources. It will identify key environmental assets and ecosystem functions of water resources to be protected.

The MDBA is using social and economic information to inform decisions about water sharing to meet environmental requirements.

The MDBA has sought advice on how changes in water availability will affect Indigenous people in the Basin. CSIRO has undertaken a scoping study on how changes in water availability might affect Indigenous communities of the Basin to inform the consideration of social and economic impacts.

Reviewing current knowledge

CSIRO has provided a review and synthesis of the current knowledge of Indigenous cultural, social, economic and environmental values of water to complement other social and economic contextual reports and assessments designed to optimise the outcomes of the Basin Plan.

Quantifying Indigenous water use and specifying Indigenous water requirements lags behind other uses in terms of the development of scientific methods to estimate the relative benefits of water use and resolve tensions between competing allocations.

The research involved a literature review and three case studies to explore the issues, conducted in:

1. Barmah-Millewa Forest on the NSW and Victorian border – this is an Icon Site under the Living Murray Program and is of great importance to the Yorta Yorta traditional owners.
2. Hay, NSW – where the Nari Nari Tribal Council is utilising water for a mix of cultural, environmental and economic purposes.
3. Brewarrina Old Mission Billabong, NSW – where the Ngemba traditional owners are undertaking restoration activities to improve the health of the billabong.

How might the Basin plan affect Indigenous people?

The research has found that Indigenous people stress the critical importance of the Basin’s river systems to social, cultural and economic life and the need for balance in meeting the needs of other water users.

The desire to restore environmental systems and the relationships Indigenous people have maintained with their countries is a key motivation behind Indigenous participation, and is an obligation within Indigenous value systems and law.

Indigenous people have diverse and interrelated interests in water and are responding in varied ways to address water management issues within their customary estates.
The study reported that the Basin’s water resources are now so tightly constrained that Indigenous people find it very hard to compete with other groups accessing water for many purposes such as to keep billabongs healthy and for fishing and recreation.

Across all three case studies, Indigenous groups have met significant barriers to accessing water and satisfying their water management objectives. These barriers are of a legal, administrative, economic, institutional and philosophical nature. To overcome these barriers the groups are engaging with many government agencies and funding programs, and are also investing their own resources.

**Opportunities presented by the Plan**

The study found that the Basin Plan and the way it is implemented presents a significant opportunity to address the long-standing neglect of Indigenous interests in water planning and to markedly improve the extent to which Indigenous people benefit from water reforms, particularly from environmental water management. Because the final impacts of changed water regimes rely on government policies and the Basin Plan implementation, there is substantial scope to exacerbate some impacts on indigenous communities as well as the potential to forego opportunities to maximise benefits to these communities. A lack of information has created uncertainty in this area.

**Investing in Indigenous capacity**

Investing in Indigenous capacity to contribute knowledge and manage environmental water offers one way of enhancing the potential benefits from greater access to water under the Basin Plan. This capacity could also spill-over into other areas of land and water management, such as national park and Indigenous protected area management.

The study has found that there is potential to open up new opportunities for Indigenous people in emerging cultural and natural resource-based industries, such as payment for environmental services, stewardship arrangements, small-scale bush foods businesses, and tourism.

**Indigenous water rights**

The Council of Australian Government’s National Water Initiative explicitly recognises the special character of Aboriginal interests in water, particularly native title rights.

It calls for water access entitlement and planning frameworks to recognise Aboriginal needs in relation to access and management. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are to be included in water planning processes, and water plans are to incorporate their objectives.

**Want to know more?**


**For more information contact:**

Sue Jackson
Phone: 08 89448415
Email: sue.jackson@csiro.au
Web: www.csiro.au/science/MDBscience

**CSIRO and the Flagships program**

Australia is founding its future on science and innovation. Its national science agency, CSIRO, is a powerhouse of ideas, technologies and skills. CSIRO initiated the National Research Flagships to address Australia’s major research challenges and opportunities. They apply large-scale, long-term, multidisciplinary science and aim for widespread adoption of solutions.