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**Geographies of Memory:
Environmental history and spatial power**

Heather Goodall



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Geographies of Memory: Environmental history and spatial power*

Heather Goodall **

Can oral history methodologies contribute to environmental histories? This paper will trace the early stages of an investigation into the history of recent river changes. This study took place in Australia, but the issues it faced are relevant to environmental studies anywhere, including India, where researchers are trying to learn how environmental change has taken place when records are scarce or give only part of the story.

For ecologists working on Australia's longest river system, the Murray-Darling, oral history seemed to offer a way to understand the changes over 150 years of colonialism for which there was little documentation. This massive river system is a connected network of tributaries and deltas, soaks, springs, gullies and ephemeral streams, along with some types of river flow which were so unfamiliar that English colonizers rapidly turned to local Aboriginal words to name them, like warrambools and billabongs. There are 23 distinct catchment systems (watersheds) which are all connected in this river system. The major rivers of this network form the borders of three States (Queensland, NSW and Victoria) before emptying into the sea in the fourth (South Australia). Each state has an uneasy relationship with the overarching Federal body administering the system, the Murray Darling Basin Authority (MDBA).

* Revised version of the Public Lecture delivered at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, 10 February 2012.

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over by rail and road. Later still the commercial fishers abandoned these rivers. Mechanization and falling commodity prices dried up the inland work in the 1940s and much of the rural population had shifted to live close to the coast. These coastal populations wanted to eat salt-water fish not frozen river fish from two days away over the ranges.

Ecologists want to restore biodiversity to these inland rivers and increase the numbers of native species and they hope to do this by strengthening local participation in rehabilitating the river habitat and water quality. Struggling to deal with different, often conflicting, state and federal bureaucracies, ecologists felt they could turn to those people who seemed to know the rivers best, the recreational fishing people who continued to go to the rivers for sport, food and relaxation. The goal was not only to learn about what people remembered but also to acknowledge the importance of local people's knowledge about environments and change.

Small studies had already been done on short reaches of some rivers, which had some success in following either the memories about particular riverine species¹ or the pastimes associated with fishing.² The promises of social history and sociology were that the memories of ordinary people would allow insights into the histories of places at an 'everyday' level.³ The MDBA expected that the members of fishing clubs along the river would offer the information about changing species and habitats which would help the authority to rehabilitate the river system, now stressed by agricultural pollution and heavy irrigation extractions.

As a historian who had used oral history methodology on the Darling river, I worked on this project in collaboration with historian,

¹ Copeland, Craig, Emmaline Schooneveldt-Reid, and Shelley Neller, *Fish Everywhere: An Oral History of Fish and Their Habitats in the Gwydir River* (Ballina: NSW Fisheries, 2003).

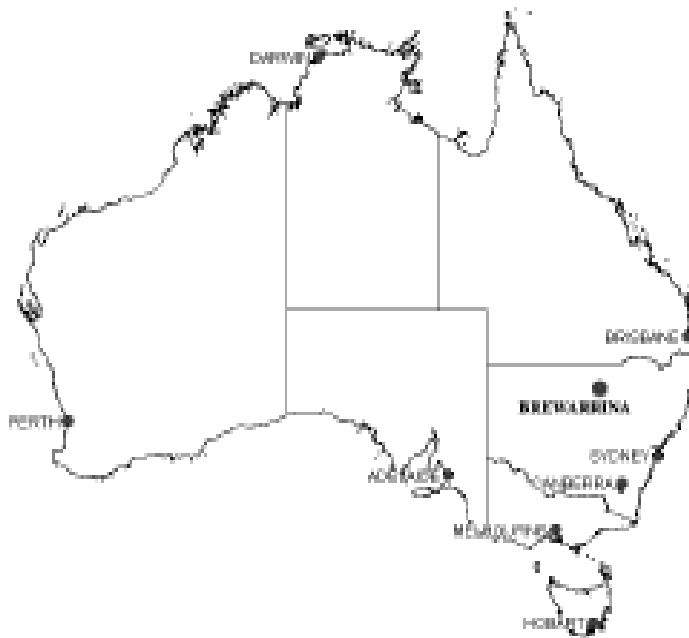
² Roberts, Jane and Geoff Sainty, *Listening to the Lachlan* (Sainty and Associates, 1996).

³ Grele, Ronald, 'Oral History as Evidence' in Charleton, Thomas, Lois E. Myers and Rebecca Sharpless (eds.) *History of Oral History: Foundations and Methodology* (Lanham: Altamira Press, 2007), pp. 33-94.

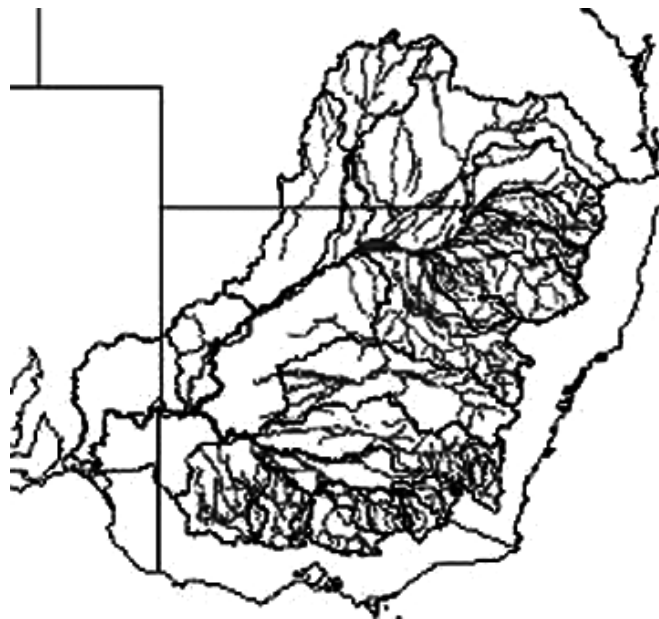
Jodi Frawley and ecologists Scott Nichols and Liz Baker. Our initial scoping study focussed on 12 reaches of the river system including some from each of the four states, as I discuss below. This study showed that memories can offer new understandings about rivers and change. We were hoping to ask people about their own memories of experiences and observations over the last 50 or 60 years – as well as about what they may have learned from older friends or family members. So as we developed research plans, we needed to ask ourselves some fundamental questions about which people we were going to ask and what limits as well as influences there might have been on how they remembered the past.

The first question was about culture and meanings. How have cultural differences created meanings by shaping observation and interpretation? The second was about power over space under colonialism. Colonizers not only renamed landscapes but they reorganized those landscapes, changing the ways different groups of people could access and use them. This in turn changed the ways those people could experience and remember those places. The third question was around the relation between memory and history, between individual recollection and collective narratives about the past. Each of these are important questions on their own – but they also interact. Cultural meanings and processes for example had to be reshaped to fit changed access conditions. Old meanings did not just disappear, but they had to be tailored and cut down to fit into cramped spaces. Again, groups who were allowed only one type of access reinforced among themselves the belief that this was the ‘normal’ way to observe these places, rather than only one perspective among many possible.

This paper will address the way these three questions had operated in the Murray Darling in the years before the MDBA attempted to use oral history to trace river changes, using the Brewarrina to Bourke section of the Barwon river as a focal example. The situation, however, is similar in all the other eleven reaches. Each of these three questions had effects on what people might have had the opportunity to observe and how they might have interpreted it. Our answers meant we had to find very different people to interview about the rivers and fishing than the MDBA had originally expected.



Brewarrina, the town located near Ngunnhu, the Ngiyampaa Fish Traps discussed in this case study, near the northern border of the state of New South Wales.



The Murray-Darling system of rivers, showing the location of the Brewarrina to Bourke Catchment on the Darling River, in north eastern New South Wales.

1. Culture and the Environment

The most obvious racial and cultural difference in northern reaches of this system – the upper Darling and its many tributaries running in from across southern Queensland and the north central NSW – has been between Anglo members of old colonizing groups (British, Scots and, as workers, the Irish) and Aboriginal people. Yet there were also other smaller but important groups, each with their own distinctive cultures. Many Chinese men had come for the widespread gold mining in the mid nineteenth-century then stayed on in contract groups employed for clearing land or agricultural work, until many of them established market gardens for towns and properties. There had been Greeks, Italians and southern Europeans commonly coming in as traders and later opened cafes or hotels; there were Yugoslavs and central Europeans, digging on the small scale opal and other mining fields which have persisted in the northern floodplain. Scattered across all these areas were some Indians who had come as traders or cameleers and some Africans who had come via USA for the gold fields.

While it was often racial differences which were paraded in public conflicts, it was the continuing everyday cultural practices and the work specializations which shaped interactions with the environment generally and the rivers in particular. Anglo settlers, for example, who were grazing sheep or cattle were acutely aware of rivers as watering points for their stock, although occasionally also as a recreational resource. Anglo women, raising children on remote homesteads, might be more actively involved in river bank environments than their husbands but this was often when their family was young, when they were either entertaining or protecting or teaching their children. The Chinese miners who stayed to become specialist vegetable gardeners – which was to save rural Australia from collective scurvy - were actively observing water in innovative small-scale irrigation works and close interactions with food crops. Aboriginal people who became drovers drew on their community's long-developed knowledge of where water sources might be, even in dry times, but their new work as stockmen meant they needed to know how to water hundreds of animals not a handful of people, so their established cultural knowledge was amplified by the demands of their changed conditions.

For each of these groups, their cultures of knowledge, religions and origin stories, like their food preferences and recipes and their habits of family and social life, all shaped what it was they noticed and cared about in the rivers. Some of these elements of cultural capital only became relevant as conditions changed. The fact that some cultures had age-old traditions of cooking carp so its many bones became softened and edible, only became useful after 1974 when invasive carp species – washed out from a southern ornamental pond - travelled on the flood waters all the long way north into Queensland.⁴ Others had great importance in earlier days: Aboriginal people’s taste for river mussels, for example, allowed them a source of protein as well as an enjoyable social resource for as long as the riverine environment continued to support healthy conditions for shell growth, which no longer holds. The implications for memory are that species and conditions will be noticed and remembered only if they are valued. If one doesn’t eat mussels, one will not notice whether they are present or not, let alone whether they are becoming fewer and less healthy.

Furthermore, the wider resources around river banks were more likely to be accessed by Aboriginal people than they were by others. Phil Sullivan, for example, a Ngiyampa man from Brewarrina on the upper Darling, recalls fishing trips which would last all day, with older people and with kids, in which bush fruits like quandongs would often be gathered while the fishing was being done.⁵ Occasionally, there would be a special event, like learning from the old people how to search for and open a native bee’s hive and there were regular everyday conversations during those long hours waiting for a bite. This was when the children heard their grannies tell stories about legends and heroes

⁴ Frawley, Jodi, Scott Nichols, Heather Goodall and Liz Baker, *Lower Darling and the Great Anabranch*, NSW DPI/Fisheries, 2011, <http://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/fisheries/habitat/publications/historical-accounts/talking-fish-in-the-murray-darling-basin>, Interview Jenny Whyman , reporting learning carp cooking techniques from Yugoslav friends; Alma Jean Sullivan, Bourke, pers com to Heather Goodall, 2011, reporting her experience of having Chinese and Vietnamese friends in Bourke imparting carp-cooking techniques.

⁵ Frawley et al., *Upper Darling: Brewarrina to Bourke*, NSW DPI/Fisheries, 2011, <http://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/fisheries/habitat/publications/historical-accounts/talking-fish-in-the-murray-darling-basin>.



as well as family networks and gossip and the best times for catching which fish. In this way, many forms of cultural life found expression on trips to the river, entangled with each other and the practicalities of the trip, but leaving a lasting impression and still circulating in similar circumstances to this day.

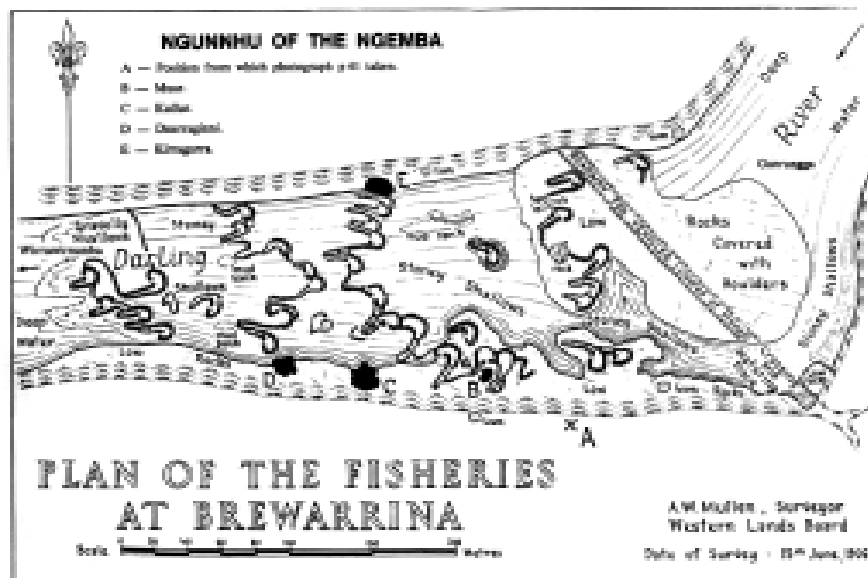
Other bodies of meaning might overlay and reshape those sketched here. These can be traced to the sharing of personal preferences in engaging with the river most directly, and may cut across those which are learnt in childhoods within particular communities. Recent research into the differences in attitudes among fishing people in Europe and the United States suggests that those people who are 'specialist' fishers, that is, who spend most of their recreational time in fishing activities, invest most money on equipment, and seek most of their socializing activities in a fishing setting, are also those most likely to attend to aspects of the fishing experience which are beyond the 'catch' including relaxation, social interactions or nature appreciation. Those fishers, on the other hand, who spend less time and resources in fishing and seek their social experiences in different settings, are those who are least interested in the non-'catch' outcomes.⁶ Yet here the issues of power and economy become evident. Who has more leisure time than others? Who has more disposable income to direct to fishing gear? Who can afford to be a 'recreational' fisher? Such personal preferences are always tailored to available resources and power.

Finally, however, there were the religious or spiritual dimensions of cultural life which might draw people to particular parts of the river and make them stay well away from others. For local Aboriginal people, such spiritually-charged places could occur anywhere along the river

⁶ Arlinghaus, R., 'On the Apparently Striking Disconnect between Motivation and Satisfaction in Recreational Fishing: The Case of Catch Orientation of German Anglers', *North American Journal of Fisheries Management*, 26/3 (2006), pp. 592-605; Ditton, R.B. & Oh, C.-O. 'Using recreation specialization to understand conservation support', *Journal of Leisure Research*, 40/4 (2008), p. 556; Michelle Voyer, William Gladstone and Heather Goodall, 'Understanding marine park opposition: the relationship between social impacts, environmental knowledge and motivation to fish', Draft submitted to *Conservation and Society*. 2011.

featuring in traditional stories but at Brewarrina, there was one particular site which reflected both Aboriginal economic life and Aboriginal traditional knowledge of creation and origins. This was Ngunnhu – known colloquially in English as the ‘Fish Traps’ or just ‘the Rocks’. Because it worked so well as a fish trap, even after it was damaged by settler interference, the rocks also had many fish in it, so it was a good site for everyone to throw in a line. Yet for Aboriginal people, this meant a different thing than it might do for those who did not know or were not interested in these stories.⁷

The Brewarrina fish traps were a complex network of rounded pens, extending 500 metres around the bend of the Barwon River, upstream from the town.



Surveyor Mullen’s plan Ngunnhu 1906, redrawn by Peter Dargin in 1976 (Dargin 1976)

The traps are in the country of the Ngiyampaa-speaking peoples, who have close links with the Yuwalaray and Muruwari peoples to the immediate north-east and north-west. These fish traps are an

⁷ Dargin, Peter, *Aboriginal Fisheries of the Darling-Barwon Rivers* (Dubbo: Brewarrina Historical Society, 1976).

extraordinary feat of engineering, reflecting deep knowledge of the river's behaviour in drought and flood as well as showing painstaking stone-on-stone construction methods. The stone pens were laid out in a matrix along a length of the river in which the bed falls steeply at the same time as it bends. This ensured that no matter how low or high, fast or slow, the river was running, at least some of the pens would be underwater and so able to entice the fish in and then trap them, safely swimming but unable to find the small downstream opening through which they had entered. The high productivity of the traps meant they could feed many people, so they were the subject of elaborate protocols ensuring neighbouring peoples had rights to the river in times of drought. The traps were the focal point of large ceremonial gatherings, which brought together not only people from these three groups, but often people from far more distant country. No matter how long the ceremonies might take, the traps ensured that many hundreds of people could be fed well for weeks at a time.

Although early white settlers refused to believe that such accomplished engineering had been built by local Aboriginal people, the Crown Land Commissioner recognized this stretch of the river as one of the earliest reservations of Crown Land for the use of Aborigines. Known as Barwon 4, it was gazetted in 1842, not only to protect the land from sale but to guarantee Aboriginal people the sole right to harvest fish from the traps.⁸ The encroachment of local whites onto this right was bitterly resented by Aboriginal people, who protested about it in 1906 and were supported by local authorities. Mullen's detailed survey drawing of the fisheries shows the careful planning and knowledge of the river evident in their design, while photographs taken of the fisheries in use around 1900 reveal their beauty and their large scale.⁹

⁸ These fisheries were interdicted to whites in 1842, [*NSW Government Gazette*, 1842, p. 587]. The Euahlayi version of the story of the fisheries was recorded by K. Langloh Parker in *Australian Legendary Tales*, Angus and Robinson, 1953, and *Euahlayi Tribe*, pp. 8, 102.

⁹ Surveyor Mullen's Report on Brewarrina Fisheries, including survey map, 9/2/1906; Elaine Thompson (ed.), *Bric a Brac*, series of locally published resource books (Dubbo: Brewarrina Local History Society, 1980s).



These show sections of the intact stone fish traps, in the 1890s and 1906 respectively, and prior to their later partial dismantling by settlers for building stone and a causeway. Photograph 1 reproduced in Dargin, 1976.



The Bre fish traps are not only a productive fishing site, but are set within a rich, enlivened landscape. The mark of Baiame, a key figure in this region's philosophy, was visible everywhere to Aboriginal people. The whole lower Darling River below Brewarrina was understood to have been created by Baiame at the fish traps, after which he made the traps themselves from his fishing net. Not only this great central story but the pathways of many other geographically-embedded narratives intersected at the fisheries before they carried their stories onwards in different directions. The whole area between the Barwon River and the parallel Cato Creek just to the north was studded with fishing holes, camp sites and episodes of these mythic journeys by ancestors. The traps were the hub of an extraordinary storied network.¹⁰

So the effects of the cultural dimensions of rivers were, firstly, that cultural dietary preferences and customs would have some groups more aware of the species they favored rather than those they didn't fancy. And the spiritual dimensions of cultures would attract and deter people in different ways. So the Aboriginal fishers would have a particular awareness of the conditions around the site where Baiame's footprint moulded the rock, while the local settler fishing person would not notice. On the other hand, the settler might fish at the rocks at night, while the Aboriginal fisher would avoid the place for fear of the threatening creatures who came out after dark to catch the unwary.

2. Colonialism and Spatial Power

The hierarchies and unequal power relations of colonies have been analyzed powerfully in many works. Not only did colonial relationships involve extraction of goods and labour, but the very discourses of nature which have continued to circulate in the western world have

¹⁰ Brewarrina Land Claim, 1981; Dargin, 1976; B. Steadman and B. Hardy, to Peter Garrett, Commonwealth Minister for the Environment; to Frank Sartor, NSW Minister for the Environment, both undated. Circulating and in author's possession; Frawley et al., 2011: *Upper Darling: Brewarrina to Bourke*. <http://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/fisheries/habitat/publications/historical-accounts/talking-fish-in-the-murray-darling-basin>.



been shaped by the histories of recent imperial expansion.¹¹ Colonial rule has invariably meant the imposition of an official landscape onto an earlier, vernacular one. This process, discussed recently by Rob Nixon in relation to South Africa among other colonies, has reshaped environments for extraction, displacing colonized people either in actual distance or by altering forever the nature of their familiar landscape, displacing them even though they remain in the same place.¹²

But colonial landscape management has aimed at segregation as well as control – compartmentalizing the allowable spaces for colonized peoples and managing their movement through spaces in ways which were very different from those of the vernacular, when priorities, uses, goals and the temporal frame were all very different. This has been most evident in Apartheid South Africa of the 1960s and 70s - with its Bantustans and Pass Laws - and today in the Occupied Territories of Palestine... with its checkpoints and Walls. Yet both these examples drew on the previous spatial structures of British colonialism in ensuring control by regulating movement and residence, and they will be familiar in any colony around the globe over the last two centuries.

In Australia, to achieve control over colonized Aboriginal people, settlers used not only fences and the built environment, but landforms as well. In particular, rivers have been critically important in demarcating the allowed and forbidden places for colonized peoples. Rivers were expected to behave like they do in Europe, where they are typically predictable and regular, often hemmed in for miles within stonework embankments and flowing only when allowed out through locks into canals. The bed of such a river could be drawn as a line on a map, clearly fixing its course, confirming its permanence as a border. Donald Worster has argued that rivers tell us much about ‘the flow of power in history’.¹³

¹¹ Deloughrey, Elizabeth and George B. Handley, (eds.), *Postcolonial ecologies: Literatures of the environment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹² Nixon, Rob, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 17.

¹³ Worster, Donald, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity and the Growth of the American West*, (Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 17.



Using rivers as racial borders in Australia was just such an exercise in consolidating settler power. In all the towns along the Darling and Murray Rivers, keeping Aboriginal people ‘over the river’ was useful. Firstly, it meant that they were close enough to the town’s white population to be an easy source of casual labour for local businesses and for sexual exploitation by the town’s men. Yet at the same time, they were clearly on the ‘outside’, so they could be conveniently excluded from the electoral roll and were refused reticulated fresh water and electricity as well as services such as sanitary and garbage collection. Left without services, Aboriginal families could more easily be labeled ‘transients’ – and therefore denied more services – but they could also be accused of neglecting their children by not sending them to school clean. With a law enabling the government to remove Aboriginal children from their families on little excuse, this was a very real threat and was used repeatedly to intimidate and control a potentially rebellious population. Finally – these riverbank places where Aboriginal people’s makeshift housing was tolerated were always on the low side of the river bends – so their ‘camps’ were the first to flood or be cut off whenever floodwaters rose.

The imposition of a colonizing landscape did not make the underlying vernacular one disappear – rather it was modified but it persisted. In her account of growing up in Collarenebri on the Barwon River, upstream from Brewarrina, Isabel Flick has described a Aboriginal geography similar to that described in many other rural areas, like the coastal Manning Valley in northern NSW.¹⁴ In Collarenebri, Aboriginal people moved around the routes which were necessary to negotiate with the white township – to the stores, the work pickup spots, the school, hospital and the allowed campsites. But they also continued to move along routes which had significance for Aboriginal people economically, like the best fishing places on the Barwon river; spiritually, like the places where carved trees continued to stand to offer testimony to local cultural life; and socially, like the segregated cemetery which

¹⁴ Flick, Isabel, and Heather Goodall, *Isabel Flick: The Many Lives of an Extraordinary Aboriginal Woman*. Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW, 2004; Byrne, Denis, and Maria Nugent, *Mapping Attachment: A spatial approach to Aboriginal post contact heritage* (Sydney: Department of Environment and Conservation, 2004).



had become a means to conserve and celebrate family networks and relationships between people and place.

Not only could cultures persist at Brewarrina and Collarenebri, but practices could intensify. Access to the broader landscape was closing down from the 1930s to the 1950s both because of the spatial discrimination of colonial segregation and because the increasing mechanization of the pastoral industry was reducing employment. So, Aboriginal movement across the country was increasingly obstructed by locked gates and denials of passage. The river banks were the places to which Aboriginal campsites were usually relegated, partly because they were legally public land and partly because they were too rugged for pastoral or agricultural development. River banks therefore remained open to Aboriginal people and offered places not only for subsistence fishing, hunting and gathering, but for washing bodies and clothes, for swimming and socializing. On the one hand, older family members could pass on stories from traditional narratives, which – in this semi-arid area – often involved ancestral figures creating or shaping watercourses. The fish traps at Brewarrina were a particularly powerful example which was continuously present for all to see. All the ceremonial songs which trace journeys continued to teach people about country overall, but because told repeatedly on the riverbank, it was the stories involving the river which gained added vitality. The increasing limitation of Aboriginal movement which focused it down onto the river did not erase knowledge of land-based places or stories, but it certainly intensified the intergenerational awareness of river and water-based stories.¹⁵

As well, the enforced concentration of subsistence and leisure time on the river led to more frequent experiences of memorable social events – the shared family and friendship events which form the stuff of memory. The very disadvantage imposed by the location of the camps, placed as they were on the ‘other side’ of the river and without services like running clean water and power, increased the importance of the river and the opportunities to observe its condition. Segregation

¹⁵ Goodall, Heather, ‘Riding the Tide: Indigenous knowledge, history and water in a changing Australia’, *Environment and History*, 14 (2008), pp. 355-84.

and the denial of other services meant that Aboriginal people had to do all their personal and clothes washing on the river bank or carry water from it up the steep slopes to the camps. It ensured that there were few leisure outlets except swimming or fishing, and so the state of the river was often on display. And, in towns like Brewarrina which imposed a curfew on Aboriginal people who were arrested if they were found within the town boundaries after dark, a night swim across the river was often the only way to escape the lock up. All these enforced immersions made the river a central part of everyone's life if they lived in the Aboriginal community.¹⁶

The outcome of the discriminatory spatial strategy was therefore, paradoxically, to increase the cultural, social and economic importance of the river from generation to generation. It ensured that right up to the present day, Aboriginal people in rural areas have grown up knowing the river as a site of culture and identity as well as economic subsistence and environmental information.

3. Memory and History – the Festival of the Fisheries

Ronald Grele has recently reviewed the changing ways that memory has been researched through 'oral history' over the last thirty years, and points to a series of important shifts.¹⁷ While the work of the Hoffmans confirmed that oral history interviews did uncover what had happened in the past, and that interviews reliably expanded what could be learnt - and from whom - about earlier events,¹⁸ it has also become very clear that everyday people are reflecting on and interpreting their own memories each time they engage in recording an interview.¹⁹ Alessandro Portelli, in his many studies in Italy and the United States,

¹⁶ Goodall, Heather, 'Reclaiming Cultural Flows: Aboriginal People, Settlers and the Darling River' in Alan Mayne (ed.), *Outside Country: A History of Inland Australia* (Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 2011), pp. 95-126.

¹⁷ Grele, (2007).

¹⁸ Hoffman, Alice M. and Howard S. Hoffman, 'Reliability and Validity in Oral History: the case for memory', in David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum (eds.), *Oral History*, American Association for State and Local History (1984), pp. 67-73.

¹⁹ Grele (2007), pp. 48-9.



has identified the importance of the speaker's subjectivity in interviews – so that we can learn 'not what a person did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, what they now think they did'. This subjectivity, Portelli argues, is just 'as much the business of history as the more visible facts'.²⁰

Elizabeth Tonkin in *Narrating Our Pasts*, her exhaustive analysis of the oral performance of memory, based on studies in Africa and elsewhere, has pointed out that historians using interviews cannot just seek facts 'like currents from a cake'. Instead, she sees facts as being embedded in interpretations arising from the analysis and subjectivities of the speakers. These performative expressions of memory must be understood as narrative structures, in which speakers use emplotment and other narrative strategies to create an explanatory context for their memories.²¹ David Carr in *Time, Narrative, History* made a similar point about European subjects: 'At the individual level, people make sense of their lives through stories that are available to them and they attempt to fit their lives into the available stories.'²²

The 'available' stories are those of the dominant histories, whether those of official histories or the sectional, partisan histories which have been collectively endorsed and are wielded as narrative weapons in conflicts between classes or communities or factions, as English studies like those of Paul Thompson and Raphael Samuel have demonstrated repeatedly.²³ Michael Frisch, historian of working class movements in the United States, argued that oral history interviews were a:

'variable weave of pure recall and reflective synthesis – historical statements as well as historical information.'

²⁰ Portelli, Alessandro, 'The Peculiarities of Oral History', *History Workshop Journal*, 12 (1981), pp. 99-100.

²¹ Tonkin, Elizabeth, *Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

²² Carr, David, *Time, Narrative and History*, (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1986).

²³ Both Samuel and Thompson have written prolifically on their UK work but their joint edited volume offers an overview of their work as well as the field of memory studies: Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, *The Myths we Live By* (London: Routledge, 1990).

Frisch saw the challenge for historians being to understand:

‘... how experience, memory and history become combined in and digested by people who are the bearers of their own history and that of their culture.’²⁴

The question of how memory is mobilized in conflicting situations speaks to the conditions to which Frisch, Portelli, Tonkin and Carr have pointed us. How do memories become mobilized as collective – and at times coercive – dominant histories? How does the subjectivity of individuals become engaged with contesting narratives of conflict? The history of environments and spatial relations have become central to conflicting positions in the upper Darling area, with rivers and fishing at the centre, and an oral history project about fishing had to take account of this situation.

While Aboriginal people on the upper Darling – in towns like Collarenebri, Brewarrina and Bourke – had always shared a firm belief within their communities about their fundamental ownership and right to the river, its fish and particularly, the fish traps, this belief had seldom been on public view. All that changed dramatically in the late 1970s when conflicting histories became the ground for a key struggle between Anglo and Aboriginal residents for recognition and rights to the land in general and the river in particular.

During major floods in 1974 and 1976, Aboriginal people had been denied access to emergency services despite their settlements ‘over the river’ being cut off – as usual. Angry and, for the first time in new alliances with legal advisers, Aboriginal leaders took their grievances to a wider urban audience through media and legal challenges.²⁵ At the same time, the rural economy was faltering as the pastoral industry declined and rural townships were trying to find

²⁴ Frisch, Michael, ‘Oral History and *Hard Times*: A review essay’, p. 78, in his *A Shared Authority: Essays on the craft and meaning of oral and public history* (Albany: State University of NY Press, 1990), pp. 5-13.

²⁵ Goodall, Heather, ‘Main Streets and Riverbanks: The politics of place in an Australian river town’, in Rosier Hood-Washington, and Heather Goodall (eds.), *Echoes from the Poisoned Well* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2006), pp. 255-270.



alternative industries. Tourism seemed promising so Brewarrina Shire Council inaugurated a 'Festival of the Fisheries', timed for the April holiday at Easter when the idea of a long weekend fishing on the Darling river might attract tourists from the coastal cities as well as other rural regions. But the Shire Council was still entirely run by Anglo townspeople and grazing interests, so no Aboriginal people were involved either in the decision or in reaping any profits. Instead, they were invited like everyone else to enter a float in the parade down the main street and enter the talent quest. For a while they did take part, but by 1979 Aboriginal people had had enough of that too.

Essie Coffey, a Murawarri leader in Brewarrina, was interviewed in 1989 and 2000.²⁶ She described the way by which local Aboriginal people's ambivalent relationship to the 'Festival of the Fisheries' was finally resolved by direct confrontation:

When the Festival of the Fisheries started, it was a procession through the main street, and they (the Shire) saw it as a festival for whites of course, for tourists to this town... a way of bringing money into the town. We won that first talent quest in the procession, won the floats that year. And we were goin' in it every year since.

But that one year – 1979 – we never put no floats in.... See it should have been our privilege to LEAD the festival and lead the float procession down the street but we couldn't. Because this is OUR fisheries, the fish traps. But the council wanted it to be European-led, by white people, by business people.

So just to prove a point that we ARE Aboriginals and this IS our country - to prove to the white people of the town that we OWN the fisheries - we just marched in! And we led that march with an Aboriginal flag.

We put it down in front of Pippos' café (the main restaurant). We put the flag down there, and everybody just sat down,

²⁶ Interviewed by the author.



it was a sit down protest! We stopped the procession coming through for about a couple of hours, then they called the fire brigades and the police from all over the country – cause they were all here for the parade. When the police couldn't pull us off the flag, they started to use the fire hoses on us. Then all the Kuris²⁷ rushed in and grabbed the hose and put it on them. ... That's when everybody protested then, right up to the police station.

It made a difference, yes, definitely. We got first place now in the processions... I just got a loan of one of the railway trucks to lead the procession again with it this year too. It was mainly through the Kuris themselves. They wanted to do something because they own the fisheries and its all ours. We wanted to prove to the white people here that we can control it and look after it and have a festival every year... because there is so much racism here and prejudice in this town and its still here, right now, as I'm being recorded – that we got to fight to get what we own and fight for what we want....²⁸

The community went on to make a formal land claim in 1982 under the impending NSW Land Rights legislation (passed 1983) and then they launched a campaign to raise funds to build a cultural centre on the banks of the Barwon on the town side, but overlooking the Fisheries. These two campaigns were expressed in very different terms to the campaigns for civil rights and workers' entitlements which had been mounted in the 1950s and 1960s. The new campaigns, grounded in the local Aboriginal people's continuing relationship to the country and the river, were expressed in the language of culture, tradition and identity. This was reflected in the design of the cultural centre once the funding was won, in which the circular museum is built around a beautiful, sculptural and working water model of the full Fisheries. Then in the community's next project, which is continuing with painstaking

²⁷ An indigenous language word used widely among Aboriginal people in NSW to mean 'our people'. [Pronounced Kuri with the 'u' as in the English word 'put'; sometimes spelled 'Koorie']

²⁸ Interviews conducted in Brewarrina 1989 and in Sydney, 2000.

consultations, the Yuwalaraay, Murawari and the Ngiyampaa of Brewarrina are rebuilding the fisheries themselves.²⁹

Memories and recent experiences of fishing in the fish traps reinforced the deeply felt belief that these Fisheries were the property of Aboriginal people. And since then as well, the memory of that successful 1979 challenge to the 'Festival of the Fisheries' has been repeated to consolidate the continuing demand for recognition as well as restoration. So memories have layered one on the other to sustain the historical narrative of continuing traditional practice and active ownership.

Winning the Memory War

These campaigns were expanded in the early 1990s. A series of high profile conflicts identified memory as the defining element in Aboriginal experience which proved discrimination and disadvantage. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission inquiry into the policy of removal of children resulted in calls for an apology to the many Aboriginal people who formed what had become known as 'The Stolen Generation', those who had been removed. More directly related to the environment were the High Court decisions and then Federal Government legislation about 'Native Title' which recognized a residual common law right to property, unlike the earlier Land Rights laws in each state which were about Parliaments conferring rights. Native title, on the other hand, acknowledged that Aboriginal people held common law property rights in land when the British invaded in 1788, some portion of which may have survived through incomplete acts of Crown sovereignty, to entitle Aboriginal people to compensation for lost access and use. The Federal Government passed legislation in 1992, known simply as 'Mabo', which stated that Aboriginal people had the right to claim for such residual property rights and compensation. This meant that each case of Native Title claim had to be tested against historical events and the sequence of alienations, whether by lease or sale, which may have been 'complete' enough to extinguish Native Title. The role of memories of land and water use in

²⁹ Goodall, 2006.



recent times were as central to these hearings as were the deeds of title.

Over the next few years, direct contestation was frequent in the media controversy over Native Title. Each of the court cases was highly adversarial despite little land actually being at stake. Nevertheless, the acrimony in public debate was intense and much of it centered on competing histories. The Aboriginal claim to recognition of tradition was often lost in the labyrinth of tracing title transfers. But public sentiment was won over by the emotive concept of ancient Aboriginal ownership, the powerful narratives of origin and the strong presence of personal memory of the use of land and rivers for subsistence as well as cultural expression.

In the bitter conflicts of the Native Title courts and media battles, Anglo graziers attempted to combat the broad public sympathy to Aboriginal narratives of history by themselves mobilizing memory narratives. They hoped to match those of Aboriginal claimants to 'traditional ownership'. A network of pastoralists in western Queensland, all with properties subject to Native Title claim, chose the term 'Bush Families' as a key phrase to signify an association with what has become the iconic Australian concept of the environment: 'the Bush'.³⁰ The Australian Government endorsed a thorough review of the many analyses of the 'bush legend', summarizing effectively:

The bush has an iconic status in Australian life and features strongly in any debate about national identity... The bush was something that was uniquely Australian and very different to the European landscapes familiar to many new immigrants. The bush was revered as a source of national ideals...

In choosing this phrase, the Queensland graziers were not only linking themselves to an icon but were making an assertion of the scale

³⁰ Lindsay McDonald, spokesperson for 'Bush Families' during the Native title debates in 1998, 1999, 2000, widely published in rural newspapers and the Queensland Courier Mail, consolidated at <http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/author.asp?id=263>



of the businesses by which they worked the land. They were presenting themselves as ‘families’ rather than corporations with national or even multi-national control. While there were undoubtedly some family farms in existence in NSW, small scale agriculture has always been less successful in Australia than large scale land management. So family farms in fact have a history of failure, and property sizes, often reduced by government interventions, have repeatedly been enlarged by amalgamation or purchase by more highly capitalized concerns.

This attempt at presenting themselves as family-scale, vulnerable and a part of the ‘bush’ legend, eventually fell flat. Most of the Native Title claims over grazing lands were either dismissed or settled very readily by payments of compensation, which was fortunate, because the concept of ‘bush families’ never really caught on among white Australians – and particularly not among the majority who live in cities on the coast. There was simply not enough collective memory of the family scale of grazing in Australia among either rural or urban populations. The urban populations who might venture out into rural Australia for trips and other forms of tourism were uninterested in depictions of ‘bush families’ and instead they have been far more responsive to campaigns attracting them to see Aboriginal traditions and customs, including those of looking after the environment.

Yet if Aboriginal people won the war of memory in the 1990s, they lost the economic war decisively. Neither Native Title nor Land Rights offered Aboriginal people the economic base they had sought from the recognition of their rights to land and water. Intensive irrigated agriculture for crops like cotton, penetrated the upper Darling river, requiring ever higher levels of capitalization to ensure safe reticulation of chemical-laden irrigated water. This new industry was highly mechanized and computerized, so Aboriginal people found themselves excluded from both land and jobs. In this, however, they were not alone. Graziers – unless they had the capital to convert to irrigated agriculture – had lost both the memory war – the battle for public sympathy - and the economic war. There was no restoration of the price of wool, and their wide acres of dusty grazing land were of little use without expensive river frontage land and then the equally expensive extraction licenses needed to buy irrigation water.



So with both Aboriginal people and graziers marginalized in the changed economic conditions – which then deteriorated still further into a very long drought - from 1996 until close to 2009 – collaboration seemed more possible.

Research Strategies

It was in this context that the MDBA had hoped that oral history gathered from the fishing club members would offer a way to learn about the river. As in a number of settler societies, like New Zealand, Canada and the United States, the membership of fishing clubs are predominantly white men. As the discussion above suggests there are likely to be others who do not participate in the clubs yet who have personal experiences of fishing. Anglo women in rural Australia, for example, have at least some periods of their lives when they are actively engaged with riverine and fishing activities, yet they are seldom members of fishing clubs. No Aboriginal people, whether men or women, were members of any of the fishing clubs in the 12 reaches of the rivers in which the MDBA research was to be conducted. The surveys of sporting activities arising from population-wide surveys, like the census, identify fishing as the most widely practiced leisure activity in Australia – and yet the fishing clubs were only ever composed of a small proportion of the rural population.

So expanding the study beyond the fishing clubs became a major aim of our newly-established team of historians and ecologists. We worked from the available local histories of each of the areas. We hoped to find more women from the Anglo community and we were interested in talking with Aboriginal people in each reach. Along many of the Murray and Darling rivers and tributaries, Aboriginal people form significant proportions of the population and have established local and regional organizations. For all communities, however, given the many people who responded to census questions by saying they enjoyed fishing, we realized we needed to seek out general organizations including elderly people's social clubs and broader community groups, as well as local government park managers and community arts staff, any of whom might be aware of broader patterns of recreational activity among people in the area.

In a scoping study of 12 different river reaches, we could only touch the surface of the possible interviewees and the range of local conditions and pressures which had shaped interactions with the rivers. So we aimed at profiling four people or couples in each reach, with at least one Aboriginal person among them if possible, and offering some sense of the diversity of those local organizations which might conceivably have an interest in the rivers.

The other major implication of the earlier discussion was that even the most casual conversations about the past of the river were likely to be deeply marked by the polarization of the conflicting politics of ownership. The role of spatial power in structuring discrimination and domination in the past meant that most environmental experiences would have been shaped by spatial segmentation and differing opportunities and furthermore to continue to be recruited to express contesting positions. It was therefore a goal to focus on individual experiences of fishing, fish species and the river generally, and not to establish a competitive structure for either the interviews or the publications and radio programs which were to result.

This approach was sustained in the publications. Each of the individual interviews was presented in its own right. The interviews were edited for length but only in close consultation with the interviewees. This meant that the individual interviews were not mined for quotations, which could be plucked out and isolated in someone else's analysis to which the interviewee might not subscribe. At the same time, the interviews were deliberately NOT shaped to obscure conflicts. Given the preceding discussion, it seemed important to acknowledge the existence of conflict and give due representation to each of the various points of view to ensure that differences between individual perspectives were not ignored or obscured.

Ensuring that each individual account was consistent with the views of the interviewee did not absolve the team of presenting broader analyses. We were at the same time opening up the challenging questions around cross-disciplinary collaboration – those between historians and aquatic biologists. Here again, it has been important to explore the differences between the approaches of historians and

natural scientists, rather than attempting to homogenize them into a single narrative approach. To this end, each of the publications – one for each of the twelve reaches studied – has been organized around self-contained segments, some of which arise from historical analysis and some from scientific analysis, each to be clearly sourced.³¹

Conclusion: Preliminary Findings and Implications

The scoping project could only go so far with limited time, but working with the strategies outlined above to take account of spatial histories, we identified four areas where memory might track changes in river species and habitats and potentially strengthen local participation in river rehabilitation.

Firstly, in terms of biological knowledge, there were differences in the riverine species observed by Aboriginal interviewees when compared with Anglo interviewees, with regards to greater diversity in the riverine life which Aboriginal people discussed. It was often the case however that Anglo fishers sought out the same creatures as did Aboriginal river users, but the Anglo fishing people were drawing on mussels and yabbies as bait for the larger fish, rather than as food in their own right. Aboriginal people were also attentive to the species of insects, animals, birds and plants which interacted on the riverbanks. Like Phil Sullivan's example of the harvesting of the native bee hive, the times spent between bites on the river could be spent gathering and harvesting the area's resources for women in particular, gathering reeds, weaving fishing nets and baskets. These differences all need to be explored in later research but the continued practice of fishing and social riverbank use has ensured continuities in knowledge about traditional methods, stories and resources.

Secondly, given the long histories now of division and antagonism, it was not surprising that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal interviewees

³¹ All of the 12 individual reach publications from this project, as well as the final compiled book including more comparative material, can be found on the NSW Department of Primary Industry/Fisheries site, at <http://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/fisheries/habitat/publications/historical-accounts/talking-fish-in-the-murray-darling-basin>,

described engaging with the river through separate organizational structures. The Fishing Clubs, as noted earlier, were largely seen as Anglo preserves, and Aboriginal fishers were reluctant to engage with them. They were much more likely to be involved with riverine rehabilitation in association with a local Aboriginal-controlled Land Council or community organization. Aboriginal people were likely to explain their participation in river restoration in terms of traditional obligations and responsibilities of looking after country, conserving river conditions and species for younger generations of Aboriginal people.

Anglo fishers interviewed were often organized through fishing clubs to revegetate river banks and help with restocking programs for native fish species. They explained their involvement not in terms of traditional obligations but rather of learning from their fishing experiences. Some people, for example, told us they had first noticed the types of conditions fish frequent, in order to be able to catch them more reliably. This led the fishers to notice damage to such habitats by heavy stock trampling of river banks or by agricultural chemical contamination or other pressures. The other common reason Anglo interviewees gave was that they had recognized – over the course of their lives as fishers – that certain species were decreasing in numbers or size or both, so they came to feel it was a responsibility to later generations of fishers to prevent such losses. Their rising awareness of negative changes was reinforced by recent popular media in magazines and television, aimed at recreational fishers, which prompted many non-Aboriginal fishing people to begin to practice ‘catch-and-release’ fishing. So now, they told us, they were fishing with lures rather than baits (which would have been swallowed) and then, once they had caught a fish with a lure, they now might take only a photograph or a measurement before they sent the living fish they had caught back into the river.

Despite these differences, both the Anglo and the Aboriginal activities were increasingly turned towards river restoration. This was an area of common ground which our publications sought to demonstrate by ensuring, in a final section which attempted to lay the ground work for future restoration, that both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups were listed as resources for further local involvement.



Thirdly, the project tried as far as possible to construct its publication in a way so that it did not appear to pit the histories of one community against another. When interviewed separately, the individual memories of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people had often suggested similar practices, although these practices might arise from different motives and not be common knowledge to the other group. One such practice was the sharing of caught fish. Many Aboriginal people talked about this practice as a regular one of fulfilling obligations between kinsfolk, while Anglo fishers would discuss sharing caught fish in particular when there was an abundance caught, too much for the use only of the fishers. Some Aboriginal and Anglo fishers talked about delivering fish to the hospital if there were extra fish caught. In these cases, Aboriginal people talked about the medicinal value of fish to sick people, whereas Anglo fishers talked about the importance of making a contribution to the resources of the local hospital.

Finally, but perhaps most importantly, memory may assist ecologists to restore rivers and native species by demonstrating – as did our interviewees, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, over and over again - how fishing has always been embedded in social relationships. Many interviewees, from both groups, expressed this in terms of learning. People spoke of learning from family members – often their extended family like cousins, uncles and aunties rather than parents – while they were on picnics and family outings like camping trips. The shared planning and preparation they described, and the interactions on the river bank around food preparation and distribution involved far more than the practice of fishing. These were complex social interactions in which human relationships were being consolidated as well as relationships being developed between people and natural environments.

A number of interviewees also talked about what they had learnt while fishing. Aboriginal people learned about traditional stories, about family and community history and as well learned about the resources of river habitats: gathering reeds for nets, finding honey and hunting birds and other small game. Non-Aboriginal people reported learning more about family networks and local information, including the paraphernalia of fishing such as gear and bait and casting techniques. For both, however, this learning was occurring through interactions

with other people as well as with the riverine species. Another aspect of social interaction was reported to occur in adult life, when travelling workers interacted with others who were also supplementing their livelihood with fishing. Aboriginal drovers we interviewed, for example, recalled sharing information and learning techniques about catching and storing fish from travelling show performers with whom they often shared campsites in outback country towns. Finally, an important theme among many of the interviewees was learning from other fishers who might be outside their normal range of social interaction. A number of non-Aboriginal fishers, for example, talked about learning about species or fishing techniques from Aboriginal fishers. It was also the case, however, that Aboriginal fishers talked over fishing with non-Aboriginal fishers, including Anglo fishers but also those from other diverse groups in the area, like the Chinese and Yugoslav Australians, all brought together by their shared interests despite being separated by so much in local politics.

For ecologists hoping to draw on memory for environmental research and to foster local community involvement in river restoration, the lessons even in this preliminary study are strong. The presence and increase of native species may be seen as an indicator of the health of river habitats, and fishing may yield memories which help to understand changing prevalence for those species but may also offer a strong motivation for restoring and conserving them. Yet if it is local involvement in fishing that is sought, it is not only 'fishing' experiences which need to be nurtured and restored but also the broader social goals which brought people to the river to fish. This applied not only for the participants of the fishing clubs – but to the broader social networks into which all of them are connected. Oral histories – the expressions of memory and history – will not be the only important resources on which environmental history must draw. For the Talking Fish project, we drew on a range of biological and historical archives and experts to build the context for the oral histories which we presented. But it was only from the oral histories that we came to see the rich social relationships which brought people to the river and sustained their fishing across the broad sweep of their lives. So while not the only resource for learning about the Murray-Darling rivers, oral histories will be crucial if we are to understand and respond to environmental change.

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While the early sections of this paper draw on my research in a number of projects over many years about the Darling River, the research on the oral history of fishing on the Murray-Darling rivers is the subject of the last section of this paper. This latter research was conducted with historian Dr. Jodi Frawley, University of Sydney and ecologists Dr. Scott Nichols and Dr. Liz Baker, from the New South Wales Fisheries Department. I am grateful for their generous assistance. The outcomes of this research, as noted in the citations for this paper, can now be viewed at the NSW Fisheries website: <http://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/fisheries/habitat/publications/historical-accounts/talking-fish-in-the-murray-darling-basin>

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