

Upper Avoca Healthy Catchment Plan: Centring Djaara values in catchment management planning (102913)

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Key Points

- The development of the Upper Avoca Healthy Catchment Plan has involved a codesigned approach to catchment planning between DJANDAK, a Dja Dja Wurrung Group enterprise, and North Central Catchment Management Authority (CMA).
- This Traditional Owner centred approach has brought stakeholders along a journey of long-term stewardship, shifting to intergenerational catchment management.
- This project offers a replicable model for sustainable catchment and waterway management for other Traditional Owner groups and catchment regions.

Abstract

The Upper Avoca catchment, nestled within Djandak (Dja Dja Wurrung Country) (Figure 1), has been stewarded by Dja Dja Wurrung People, known as Djaara, for millennia. However, post-colonial settlement has disrupted traditional management, leaving Country and waterways in dire need of healing. The Upper Avoca Healthy Catchment Planning project was designed to reintegrate Djaara knowledge, values, and traditional management into the Upper Avoca catchment, restoring harmony between people and Country.

A partnership of DJANDAK, a Dja Dja Wurrung Group enterprise, and North Central Catchment Management Authority (CMA), crafted the Upper Avoca Healthy Catchment Plan, facilitated by RM Consulting Group (RMCG). We developed the structure and content of the plan through analysis of existing DJANDAK Dja Dja Wurrung strategy and policy, North Central CMA plans, catchment data, a series of facilitated workshops with stakeholders and conservation experts, and time on Country. The process centred Djaara values and knowledge with partners' priorities to ensure mutual outcomes for Djaara, Djandak and the protection of waterway health in the Upper Avoca catchment.

Centring Djaara values in planning leads all stakeholders to take on a mindset of long-term stewardship and intergenerational responsibility for healthy country, and increases appreciation of the interconnectedness of landscape, natural systems and people. This is a shift away from short-term thinking and towards holistic, intergenerational catchment management.

This work offers a replicable model for culturally centred, sustainable catchment and waterway management. It illustrates the value of respecting and integrating two knowledge systems for the benefit of Country. Through healthy catchment planning, Traditional Owners and other stakeholders stand side by side in managing Country.

Keywords

Traditional Owners
Country
Knowledge
Co-design
Catchment planning
Stewardship.

Introduction

The Upper Avoca catchment, nestled within Djandak (Dja Dja Wurrung Country), has been stewarded by Dja Dja Wurrung People, known as Djaara, for millennia, using Traditional management techniques and an intimate knowledge and connection to Country. However, post-colonial settlement has disrupted traditional management, leaving Country and waterways in dire need of care and healing.

This project has been designed to reintegrate Djaara knowledge, values, and traditional management into the Upper Avoca catchment, restoring harmony between people and Country through a coordinated effort across the catchment to heal Djandak.



Figure 1. Map of waterways and floodplains on Djandak, Dja Dja Wurrung Country.

The development of an Upper Avoca Healthy Catchment Plan had been identified as an opportunity to create a coordinated approach to managing natural assets in the catchment that embeds Traditional Owner values and aspirations.

It was also intended the plan would incorporate partners' priorities to ensure that both a co-designed and delivered program could be achieved that would have mutual outcomes for Djaara, Djandak (Djaara country) and the conservation of biodiversity rich communities.

A key focus of the plan’s development has been to include:

- a Djaara vision, goals and actions for the region based on the foundation of Djaara knowledge, values and traditional management
- a need for more effective coordination of land and water management of the catchment that sees Country as an integrated connected whole
- the inclusion and cooperation of a wide range of environment and water management agencies and community groups that can contribute to this objective.

The aim of this paper is to highlight this innovative Traditional Owner led approach to approach to codesigned catchment management. In the sections below we outline how engagement and collaboration has been combined with Traditional Owner knowledge, to develop a new plan for the long-term health of the Upper Avoca catchment.

This project contributes to Dja Dja Wurrung and Victorian Government policy as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Djaara and Victorian Government policy and strategy relevant to catchment planning

Policy	Intent	Relevance to Healthy Catchment Plan
<i>Dhelkunya Dja: Dja Dja Wurrung Country Plan 2014-34</i> <i>(Dja Dja Wurrung policy)</i>	The Country Plan affirms the aspirations and describes the future of Djaara, the Traditional Owners of Dja Dja Wurrung Country.	Country Plan Goal 5: Rivers and Waterways: Our rivers and waterways are healthy and meet the needs of our people and land.
<i>Dhelkunyangu Gatjin Strategy, 2023</i> <i>(Dja Dja Wurrung policy)</i>	Dhelkunyangu Gatjin aims to mobilise Djaara’s rights to gatjin (water) under the their Recognition and Settlement Agreement, and supports the delivery of the Dhelkunya Dja Country plan, in particular Goal 5: Rivers and Waterways.	A baring (pathway) of the Dhelkunyangu Gatjin Strategy is that Djaara Lore informs water management decisions (see Figure 2 for pathway to this objective)
<i>North Central Regional Catchment Strategy 2021 - 2027</i> <i>(North Central CMA policy)</i>	The RCS sets a vision for integrated management across the region, identifies priorities and targets, and provides a framework to coordinate effort.	RCS targeted outcomes include: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Traditional Owners self-determined participation and leadership in cultural and natural resource management 2. Increase in the number of projects/programs co-designed, delivered in partnership with, or led by Traditional Owners.
<i>Water is Life</i> <i>Traditional Owner Access to Water Roadmap</i> <i>(Victorian State Government policy)</i>	Provides an <i>important</i> framework to create and maintain a careful and considered balance between Traditional Owner self-determination in water access and management, and the rights and entitlements of a range of stakeholders.	Water is Life targeted outcomes include: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Recognition of waterways and their surrounding lands as living, integrated, natural, and cultural entities in law, with Traditional Owners recognised as a unique ‘voice’ of the living entities 2. Increased involvement of Traditional Owners in public land management.

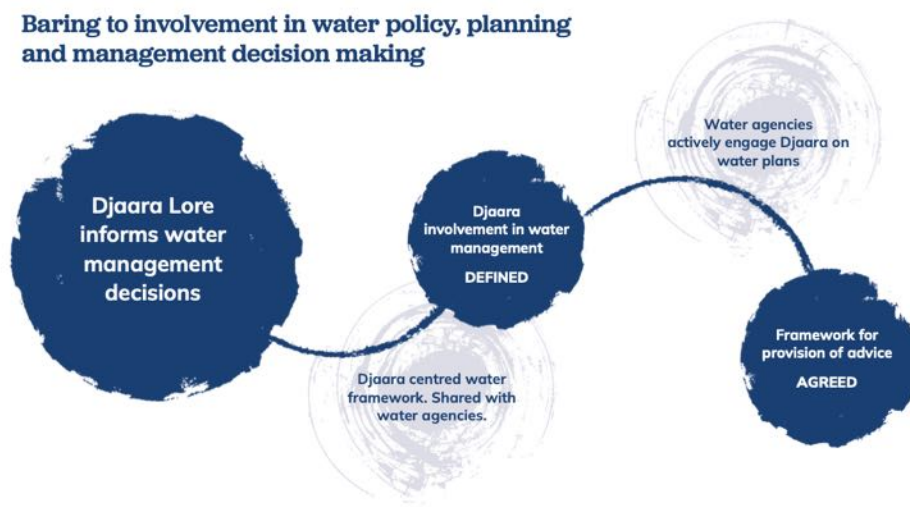


Figure 2. Baring (pathway) to Djaara involvement in water policy planning and management decision making, Source: Dhelkunyangu Gatjin, 2023.

Approach

Development of Upper Avoca Healthy Catchment Plan has involved a partnership of DJANDAK and North Central CMA.

RMCG were engaged to develop the structure and content of the plan through analysis of existing DJANDAK strategy and policy, North Central CMA plans, catchment data, a series of facilitated workshops with stakeholders, community representatives and conservation experts, and time on Country.

A key early focus was working directly with DJANDAK to capture the cultural knowledge they were happy to share through DJANDAK's recent Upper Avoca Aboriginal Water Assessment (AWA) (DJANDAK, 2023). This was used in manner that protected culturally sensitive information in line with Dja Dja Wurrung Cultural Integrity Guidelines (DJAARA, 2022).

Knowledge from the AWA together with information from past reports and studies, including the North Central Regional Catchment Strategy (North Central CMA, 2021) were compiled in a discussion paper to share as background with workshop participants.

This was followed by a series of three DJANDAK led community and stakeholder workshops aimed at:

- Developing a vision for the Upper Avoca catchment
- Refining specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound (SMART) goals for the plan
- Assessing the feasibility of actions to achieve the goals.

Stakeholders included agency and non-for-profit representatives from DJANDAK, North Central CMA, Parks Victoria, Landcare, Trust for Nature, Biolinks Alliance, Bush Heritage, Parks Victoria, Central Victoria Biolinks, Pyrenees Shire Council, Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) and community representatives from the Wedderburn Conservation Management Network, Kara Kara Conservation Management Network, and the Buloke and Northern Grampians Landcare Network.

The first two workshops were held in Bendigo – with the third held as a walk on Country – led by DJANDAK representatives (Figure 3). A further meeting was held with Kapa Gatjin (Dja Dja Wurrung's water knowledge group). The use of the three workshops combined with time on Country and the Kapa Gatjin meeting helped to foster trust and relationships between project stakeholders and to develop ownership of the plan and its outcomes.

This process also centred Djaara values and knowledge with partners' priorities to ensure mutual outcomes for Djaara, Djandak and the protection of waterway health in the Upper Avoca catchment.



Figure 3. Walk on Djandak (Country) with DJANDAK and community and agency stakeholders

Key findings

The findings of this work show the significant impact of integrating Traditional Owner values into catchment management planning.

Throughout the workshops and time on Country, we noticed that the framework led to participants adopting a mindset oriented towards long-term stewardship and intergenerational responsibility for the health of the Upper Avoca.

“the approach to the Healthy Catchment Plan needed to be a flexible and adopt an ongoing approach. While it is important to ensure people value the catchment, the plan needs to ensure that everyone is pulling in the same direction for successful management”

(Project participant, Workshop 2)

The approach fostered a deeper appreciation for the interconnectedness of landscapes, natural systems, and human communities.

Centring Traditional Owner policy in catchment planning is a significant paradigm shift away from prevailing short-term perspectives and towards a more holistic, long-term vision for catchment management.

It also embeds deep-rooted Traditional Owner knowledge (formed as part of the Upper Avoca AWA) with contemporary scientific approaches to catchment planning and management, such as the North Central Waterway Strategy.

During the healthy catchment planning process, the participants set four key plan goals (Table 2) (noting that these are still being reviewed within both organisations).

Table 2. Upper Avoca Country Plan goals

Theme	Description
Djaara-led cultural management <i>(Djaara word to be confirmed)</i>	This theme is about Djaara-led cultural management and empowerment of landscape throughout the Upper Avoca. It encompasses upholding Djaara rights to access Djandak and to practice culture. Djaara will help restore Country through Traditional Ecological Knowledge to provide for the needs of Djaara.
Healthy connected landscapes	This goal is about nurturing ecosystems that are robust and interconnected – supporting healthy native animals and plants. While the Avoca River is unregulated, the Upper Avoca catchment is highly modified. Long term health depends on protecting and connecting high value places of cultural heritage, remnant vegetation, and waterways (or chains of ponds) with deep refuge pools.
Working together	This goal is about all stakeholders working together to achieve a healthy, connected catchment, including Djaara, government, not-for-profit and community organisations.
Culture of caring for Country	This goal is about fostering a sense of stewardship amongst the wider community who are connected to the Upper Avoca. It is about cultivating a deep, personal commitment to the care and management of the broader catchment.

In line with these goals, a series of specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound (SMART) actions have been developed aimed at:

- Improving landscape connections within the catchment and linkages with other catchments
- Protecting waterway health, particularly deep pools that hold special cultural value and as refuges during periods of low flows
- Protection of key flagship species, such as:
 - Red gums (Figure 4)
 - Endangered orchids
 - Swift Parrot
 - Powerful Owl
 - Yam Daisy
 - Koala.
- Engaging the wider community in protecting and improving connections within the Upper Avoca catchment.

The development of these actions was also supported by a cost benefit analysis that also considered their relative feasibility, impact and cost.



Figure 4. River Red Gum along the Upper Avoca River an important flagship species in the plan

Conclusions

Traditional Owner-led catchment planning is a major evolution in sustainable catchment management. This method transcends mere recognition of cultural practices, placing Traditional Owners at the helm of ecological decision-making. By integrating their deep-rooted knowledge with contemporary scientific methods, we establish a holistic, intergenerational management framework.

This project has shown how centring Djaara values in a codesigned planning approach can lead to improved catchment planning outcomes by:

- Improving two-way knowledge sharing, taking into account the traditional ecological knowledge of those who have been managing the catchment and landscape for thousands of generations
- Identifying mutually beneficial outcomes for the natural landscape – particularly landscape connectivity, waterway and catchment health and cultural values.

The key to this success was the adoption of a novel Djaara centred plan development approach that incorporated the following key features:

- A strong, evidence-based foundation that integrates Traditional Owner knowledge and lore, such as the Aboriginal Water Assessment, alongside western science
- A staged planning approach that positions Traditional Owners at the forefront of the planning and decision-making processes, ensuring their perspectives and needs shape the outcomes from the outset
- Active, face-to-face engagement between Traditional Owners, agency stakeholders, and community representatives within a culturally safe environment. This fostered a sense of shared ownership over project outcomes and planned actions, helping build collective ownership for the catchment plan outcomes and actions.

This work offers a replicable model for culturally centred, sustainable catchment and waterway management. It illustrates the value of respecting and integrating two knowledge systems for the benefit of Country. Through healthy catchment planning, Traditional Owners and other stakeholders stand side by side in managing Country.

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