

Lake Victoria

A special place

Lake Victoria in south-western NSW is a special cultural place and a key national water resource.

It is an important cultural heritage site for the Aboriginal community and an indispensable environmental resource for a major part of the health of the River Murray, its plants, animals and ecosystems.

In several important ways, Lake Victoria is representative of the issues the Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) faces in balancing the range of human, economic and environmental interests of the Basin.

It highlights the importance and the need to manage water resources in an integrated way that takes full account of cultural and environmental awareness.

The Lake provides a vital supply of water for people in New South Wales, Victoria and particularly for the Lower Murray region and other major towns and cities throughout South Australia.

Above left: Frenchmans Islands – Lake Victoria: courtesy of Alf Richter

Above right: Sunrise over Lake Victoria: courtesy of P. Mills MDBA

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'Conflict on the Rufus, South Australia (from a sketch by W.A. Cawthorne) – State Library of Victoria Background image: Painting by Peter Peterson

AN ANCIENT AREA

Lake Victoria is an ancient area set into the clays of the much older and vaster Lake Bungunnia. About 10,000 years ago, the amount of water flowing down the Murray reduced and the Lake contracted to a small pond inside its bigger basin.

Aboriginal people lived in the region from at least 45,000 years ago.

Before Lake Victoria was regulated, the vegetation around it included river red gum (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*) and black box (*Eucalyptus largiflorens*) woodland, sedgeland and grassland. Saltbush (*Atriplex nummularia*) and lignum (*Muehlenbeckia florulenta*) also grew in some areas.

While little is known about the wildlife before regulation began, the explorer, Charles Sturt wrote in his journal in 1844 "...the expanse of water, on which are innumerable waterfowl, the majestic swan, the screaming long-billed 'Navarete' and beautiful spur-winged plover, forms a beautiful picture."

Below: Rufus River/Nanya Island 2006: Lyn Barnes



THE EUROPEANS ARRIVE

The arrival of the Europeans in the 1830s disturbed and eventually shattered the Aboriginal people's pattern of life. The main impact was initially from overlanders moving herds of sheep and cattle along the River Murray.

The Aboriginal people known locally as the Maraura, a sub-group of the Barkindji people, resisted strongly. They were no match for the superior firepower of the newcomers and the deadly exotic diseases they brought.

The conflicts culminated in 1841 in what has come to be known as the Rufus River Massacre in which about 35 were killed and 16 injured. This and other instances of resistance emphasise the area's special spiritual significance for Aboriginal people now living in the region.

Dispossession soon followed with the land taken over for pastoral leases. Many of the Maraura people worked for the pastoralists, but by the 1890s only a few remained.

In the mid-1890s, Harry Mitchell and his wife Mary Alice McGregor, Barkindji people from the Lower Darling River, moved to Lake Victoria Station, and worked there for many years. Many of the Barkindji families now associated with Lake Victoria are descendants of Harry Mitchell.

DOUBLING THE LAKE'S CAPACITY

In 1919 the River Murray Commission approved the construction of the Lake Victoria Storage – 52 km of levee banks and three regulators – which doubled the natural Lake's water capacity up to 680 gegalitres.

The South Australian Government constructed this work for the four Governments which constituted the Commission and have managed the storage ever since.

Landscape changes included re-routing river channels and damming the southern lakeshore with embankments. The constructions and management activities came to dominate the landscape.

From 1928, the Lake was operated as an off-river storage vital to the water requirements of communities along the Murray in three states, underwriting their agricultural and economic development.

Over the next 60 years the raised level of the Lake killed much of the existing shore vegetation and changed erosion and sedimentation patterns, exposing Aboriginal burials and occupation sites.

AIR FORCE TRAINING

During World War 2 Lake Victoria was used as an air-to-ground gunnery range by the RAAF's 2 Operational Training Unit, based at Mildura.

There were a number of crashes in the area and 6 airmen lost their lives. Some of the aircraft were salvaged while the remains of two airmen remain missing in the Lake bed along with their aircraft.

DISCOVERING A LINK TO A FASCINATING ABORIGINAL HISTORY

For decades Lake Victoria played a key role in the water supply regulation, salinity mitigation and environmental flow management of the Murray-Darling system. It ensured that South Australia – the only state guaranteed a minimum monthly flow under the Murray-Darling Basin Agreement – received its entitlement.

Below: Enlarging 'Frenchmans' Creek to supply water to Lake Victoria – c 1920: courtesy SA Water



Historically, the Lake has been filled during the winter-spring season from the River Murray (through Frenchmans Creek) and drawn down back to the Murray (via Rufus River) during summer-autumn as it supplies the bulk of the South Australian water entitlement.

But in 1994, when the Lake level was lowered for maintenance, important Aboriginal human remains and cultural artefacts were discovered.

The extensive remains were tangible evidence that dense populations of Aboriginal people had lived around the Lake for many thousands of years. Traditionally, the Lake was within the lands of the Maraura people, a sub-group of the Barkindji people, whose country extended north of Wilcannia to the Murray-Darling junction and west of the Darling to the Chowilla area.

The archaeology provides a unique record of the prehistory at the lake including Aboriginal lifestyle. There was evidence of intact domestic features (camp sites, stone tools, grindstones, shell middens, hearths, etc.) and large burial grounds.

The then River Murray Commission, moved to protect what appeared to be the most significant areas. Soon after, it ordered an archaeological survey and began consulting local Aboriginal Elders on protection measures, with local Aboriginal people employed to carry out much of the work.

While most of the Elders would have preferred that the burials had not been flooded in the first place, they also recognised Lake Victoria's key role as a reliable water supply on which so many people depended.

Below: Parliamentary Deputation 1905

Cal Lal graziers meet members of South Australian Parliament at Lake Victoria in front of the paddle steamer 'Gem', to see whether it could be used as a reservoir for irrigation of South Australian fruit areas, 12 January 1905





Mrs. McKinley, who survived the Rufus River massacre by swimming across the river with baby on her back. (Reiner, 1905)

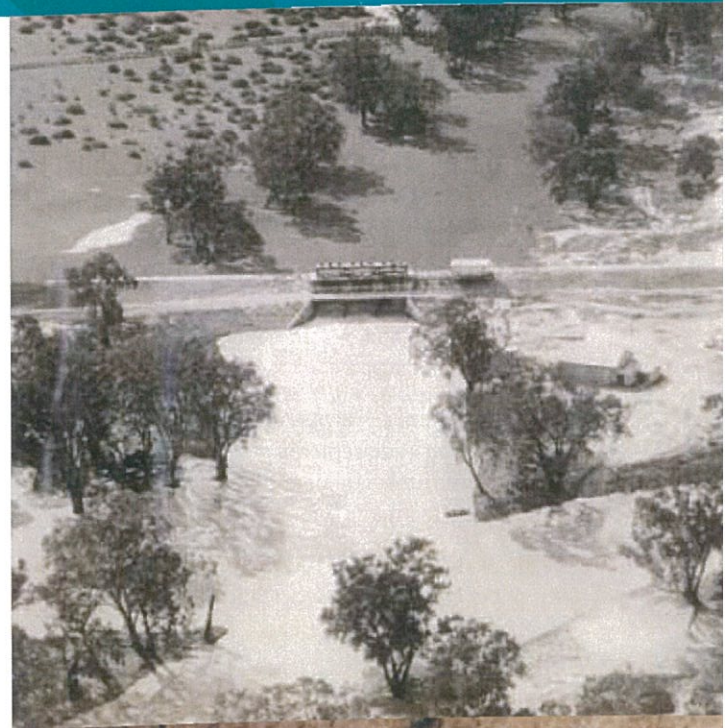
LARGEST CONSERVATION PROJECT

Since the archaeological survey of the lakeshore undertaken in 1994, operation of the Lake as a water storage has been restricted. The MDBA has invested considerable funds on what has become the largest single cultural heritage conservation project in the Murray-Darling Basin.

To ensure that the important objectives of protection and conservation are met now and into the future, the MDBA has developed through the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Act (1974) a Cultural Landscape Plan of Management (Plan) and Lake Victoria Operating Strategy.

Finding the right balance has involved many stakeholder groups, as well as the Governments of the Murray-Darling Initiative. A key part of developing the Plan has been the close and continuous involvement of the Aboriginal community, landholders and other stakeholders in the decision-making process.

The history of Lake Victoria and its people – ancient and modern – is a fascinating chapter in Australian history. But an appreciation of the background is essential to a proper understanding of the issues surrounding this nationally significant place.



*Top: Lake Victoria outlet – 17 June 1928: courtesy SA Water
Middle: Grindstones found on the Lakeshore: courtesy Jeannette Hope
Bottom: Burial mound on Moon Island: courtesy Jeannette Hope*

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ADVISORY COMMITTEE FORMALISES CONSULTATIONS

In 1996, the consultative process with the Aboriginal community and other stakeholders was formalised through the establishment of the Lake Victoria Advisory Committee (LVAC). The Committee's main role is to provide input and advice on aspects of the management of Lake Victoria relating to protection of cultural heritage.

The LVAC includes an independent chairperson and member with cultural heritage expertise, representatives of the Aboriginal community; the Barkindji Maraura Elders Council (BMEC), one representative each from the Murray Darling Basin Authority, NSW Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH), NSW Office of Water (NOW), South Australian Water Corporation (SA Water), NSW Aboriginal Land Council and the Dareton Local Aboriginal Land Council, Landholders and the Lower Murray Darling Catchment Management Authority (LMD CMA), with a place reserved for a representative from the broader community of water users.

The BMEC is a group in its own right, whose members are Aboriginal people with traditional and historic ties to Lake Victoria. They form the basis of the Aboriginal representation on the LVAC and provide a link to the broader Barkindji and Maraura community.

THE SECTION 90 CONSENT

Because of the critical need to continue Lake Victoria water storage operations, the MDBA (the then MDBC) applied to the Director-General of the NSW NPWS, now OEH, in April 1998 for consent to "destroy, deface or damage an Aboriginal relic/place under Section 90 of the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Act, 1974" and a Permit to disturb relics under Section 87 of the Act.



Remnants of Wirraway parts found at the Lake: courtesy Peter Mills MDBA

The Commission was not seeking to intentionally damage Aboriginal places or relics, but it was recognised that this could occur as a consequence of operating the Lake as a water storage. The application did not seek permission to destroy, deface or damage any burials.

As part of the application for the Consent, the Commission had to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The Statement sought to provide a balance between the use of Lake Victoria as an important water storage in the Murray-Darling Basin system and the management and protection of the significant cultural heritage found at the Lake. The then NSW NPWS (now OEH) granted the Consent, concluding that Lake Victoria could continue as a major water storage facility while minimising potential damage to Aboriginal relics and to the foreshore of the Lake.

This would be possible by strategic management of Lake water-levels to minimise erosion and to maintain and enhance vegetation.

After 10 years implementation of the altered management strategy, re-establishment of native vegetation along some sections of the foreshore has indeed been spectacular. This has contributed to the restoration of natural values and the protection of cultural heritage within the landscape.

THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE PLAN OF MANAGEMENT

The conditions of the Consent called for the preparation of a Plan of Management that would:

- formalise the role of the Elders in decision making on protection and management of their heritage at the Lake through the Lake Victoria Advisory Committee.
- establish a communications strategy actively involving both the Aboriginal community and wider community interests including landowners and water users who benefit from the water supply provided from the Lake;
- manage water levels within the Lake to promote the establishment and maintenance of native vegetation on the lakeshore so as to minimise potential damage to Aboriginal places or relics or to the aesthetic value of the Lake as a significant cultural landscape;
- provide for the continued security of supply to water users in the Murray-Darling Basin which results from operating the Lake as a water storage; and
- recognise that the MDBA will continue to operate and manage the Lake in accordance with the relevant NSW legislation and the Murray-Darling Basin Agreement.

The Plan of Management sets in place strict guidelines that minimise environmental impacts and conserve and manage cultural and natural heritage values.

VISITING THE LAKE VICTORIA AREA

Lake Victoria is an area of intense historic, environmental and engineering interest to a wide variety of visitors.

At the Information Bay and Memorial Lookout at Lake Victoria, visitors can learn more and experience the wonder at this desert oasis, now a vital water supply, rich in Aboriginal heritage.

Camping and fishing areas on the Rufus and Murray Rivers are available to visitors. At the Rufus River campsite adjacent to the Outlet Regulator, water, shade and toilets are available. The River Murray campsite is 'bush camping' with no facilities. Turn off 100 m East of the Outlet Regulator, 3 km to Lock 7. Boil all water. Refer to map below.

The Scaddings Bridge camp ground is also provided for public use. Turn off the Main Wentworth Road at the sign post indicating "Lock 8 and Scaddings Bridge".

ACCESS PROTOCOLS AND CODES OF BEHAVIOUR

While visitors are welcome to the Lake Victoria area, access to the Lake and foreshore areas is controlled via implementation of an 'Access Protocol' as defined with the LVCLPoM. Requests for admission to the Lake environment must be submitted to the Supervisor, Cultural Heritage Management at on 03 50 278218 at least one month in advance. Approval may be subject to consideration of a written proposal by the BMEC and LVAC.

A Code of Behaviour also applies to protect the fragile nature of the environment and its cultural heritage and includes:

- acting respectfully towards the Aboriginal heritage of the Lake and the rights, equipment and facilities of the landholders;
- visitors in vehicles are required to stay on tracks and to abide by any other guidelines from SA Water, NSW Office of Water, OEH, MDBA or landowners. Private land is restricted;
- carry out all rubbish with you;
- try to leave everything as you found it. Do not disturb historic places, Aboriginal sites, plants, native animals and livestock;
- minimise use of firewood, do not cut standing trees, thoroughly extinguish fire before leaving; and
- Aboriginal and historic places/relics are protected by law.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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