



# Save the Murray

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## Indigenous Australian Occupation



The Murray-Darling Basin is one of the richest sources of Indigenous archaeological and heritage sites in Australia. There are many hundreds of significant Indigenous sites along the River. They include scarred trees, burial sites, campsites, canoe trees, hidden sites and earth sites. These places are often not accessible to the public as many are located on private property. When travelling on roads along the Murray River, tourist information signs will highlight the location of sites such as scarred trees that can be visited.

Many of the national parks within the Murray-Darling Basin offer great opportunities to learn about Indigenous Australian cultures. Of particular note is Mungo National Park, the focal point of the Willandra Lakes World Heritage area and the traditional country of the Paakantyi, Mutthi Mutthi and Ngiyampaa. Nearly 50,000 years ago the now dry lakes were often filled

with fresh water. The park is famous because evidence of indigenous camp fires, middens and burials are preserved in the now dry lake shore. A detailed record of Australia's past climate, fauna and lake levels is also preserved. It's hard to believe that up until 25,000 years ago this semi-arid country was a series of vast lakes supporting a very different array of wildlife. Once, Mungo National Park was home to giant kangaroos, wombats and other mega fauna as well as Tasmanian Tigers and Devils.

The Ramsar listed Hattah-Kulkyne National Park, one of only three Biosphere Reserves in Victoria is a significant site for Indigenous people. During flood periods, Indigenous people camped on mounds that formed islands in the high water, moving from place to place in canoes constructed from the bark of River Red Gums.

### **How did Indigenous people use the Basin?**

Indigenous people used the River Murray for many purposes prior to, and after European settlement. Apart from the obvious source of water, the Murray-Darling Basin's rivers provided a rich supply of food including waterfowl, mussels, fish, possums and tortoises, fruits of the quandong, pig-face, dillon bush, wattle and the native apple. Bark was used to make canoes, food dishes and water containers. Reeds and sedges were utilised for making baskets and mats. Village type settlements in the form of shelters made from close set logs that had been waterproofed with grass and clay were common within the Basin in winter and the population density was as high as one person for every kilometre along the River Murray.

The rivers were used by Indigenous Australians for transport and as a trading route between communities. The rivers were also used for fun and recreation and as a play area for children, just as they are today.

Groups of Indigenous people throughout the Murray Darling Basin knew the river by different names, they



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## Indigenous Australian Occupation Continued

include INDI, near its source, MILLEWA around Echuca, and MURRUNDI for a section of the river in South Australia. Each different Indigenous group spoke a different language so there are many different names for the river.

Some of the Indigenous groups who inhabited the Murray Darling Basin include the Wiradjuri, Yorta Yorta, Wamba Wamba, Wadi Wadi, Barapa Barapa, Muthi Muthi, Latje Latje, Barkinji and Ngarrindjeri people. Many of who still retain bonds to their river heritage.

### **Ngarrindjeri Dreaming Story**

Dreaming Stories are a means of passing on knowledge of the land and water from generation to generation. Indigenous people believe that they are part of the land, and by caring for it, it will care for them by providing food to eat, water to drink and shelter. Different language groups have different dreaming stories relating to the creation of their land. The Ngarrindjeri people of the Coorong have a dreaming story for the creation of the River Murray, the story is outlined below.

Ngurunderi is the all powerful ancestor of the Ngarrindjeri people of the Coorong. It was his journey to the Coorong that created the River Murray and its surrounds. Ngurunderi was chasing a large Murray cod called Ponde, throwing his spear at it many times, each time the cod escaped, it rushed forward, creating the river channel. In its attempts to escape, the fish turned to and fro, creating the numerous bends we now see in the river. At last, the giant fish Ponde arrived at Lake Alexandrina, where it floundered about in the shallows creating the large lakes we have today.

Ngurunderi and his family arrived to find the old warrior named Nepele there before them. Joining forces, they killed the giant fish. The place where they killed Ponde is now a sandbank in the lake. Ngurunderi cut the giant fish into small pieces throwing each piece into the water. The pieces came to life and swam away, some as cod, some as catfish others as mullet, etc.

Finally there remained only the bones, which Ngurunderi cut up and threw into the water, these turned into the Bony bream, a fish still frustrating to any person that tries to eat it today.