



Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Water Interests Communique #5, February 2024

26th meeting, Gayini, New South Wales

27–29 February 2024

The Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Water Interests met on Nari Nari land in southwest New South Wales, on 27–29 February 2024. The Nari Nari Tribal Council (NNTC) hosted Committee members at Gayini. Gayini is a vast property owned and managed by its Traditional Custodians—the NNTC—for the conservation of its precious wildlife and the protection of significant Cultural heritage¹.

We were pleased that representatives from the New South Wales Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (NSW DCCEEW) were able to attend the meeting in person.

On day 1 of the meeting, we enjoyed a warm Welcome to Country by Mr Ian Woods, founding Chairperson of the NNTC, and then undertook a tour of the Gayini wetlands to learn about its history, conservation efforts, Cultural values, and vision for the future.

Following the tour, we commenced formal meeting proceedings and voted on the 2024 Executive team. We elected Mr Rene Woods to be the Chair of the Committee, with support from Dr Virginia Marshall as Deputy Chair.

It was great to hear from Mr Tony Bigwood from the Commonwealth Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water who shared some of the priorities of the National Water Reform Committee (NWRC) Hydrological Modelling Sub-committee, including using hydrological modelling technologies to model Cultural water outcomes. The NSW DCCEEW Aboriginal Water Program shared progress on development of their Aboriginal Water Strategy and discussed the important work of the 12 NSW Regional Aboriginal Water Committees.

On day 2, the Committee endorsed its Manual and annual Workplan and discussed how the new National Water Agreement (NWA) is progressing, including the important Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander water narratives, objectives, and outcomes that we have worked hard to ensure are woven throughout the new NWA. We also had a great discussion about the important priorities that the Committee sub-groups will focus on in 2024, including:

- Supporting and advising on Phase 2 and Phase 3 consultations as part of the new NWA.
- Supporting the development and implementation of the Murray—Darling Basin Aboriginal Water Entitlements Program. Achieving progress and commitment from governments towards agreeing to a National Closing the Gap Inland Waters Target (15c).
- Supporting the development and implementation of the Murray—Darling Basin Aboriginal Water Entitlements Program.
- Contributing to and supporting the Productivity Commission’s Stakeholder Working Group for the National Water Reform Inquiry process.

¹ The Nature Conservancy (www.nature.org/en-us/about-us/where-we-work/asia-pacific/australia/stories-in-australia/gayini-nimmie-caira/) Accessed on 11 March 2024.

- Attending and speaking at national water forums and other water meetings to build the reputation and visibility of the Committee.

We also had an interesting discussion with Mr Angus MacGregor from the Commonwealth DCCEEW Basin Policy and Science Branch about the Great Artesian Basin and the work of the NWRC National Groundwater Sub-committee. We talked about the impact of climate change on groundwater and the importance of improving collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to consider Cultural water values in groundwater policy.

A highlight for the final day of the meeting was speaking with the Hon Rose Jackson, NSW Minister for Water (virtually). We were happy to have the opportunity to ask Minister Jackson questions about supporting enhanced water outcomes and shared benefit for Aboriginal people in NSW.

We also discussed the Committee's strategic focus for 2024 and agreed to develop a suite of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander *water actions* to support a wide range of water reform initiatives, including the new NWA. Just like our Insights Paper, we aim for the *water actions* to build shared knowledge and understanding across all levels of government, but to also create a platform for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to engage with and recognise how different water reforms aim to increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' control of water.

Next meeting

Our next meeting is a virtual meeting on 3 April 2024, followed by an in-person meeting in Melbourne (Wurundjeri Country), from 15–17 May 2024.

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