



History of the River Murray

It is thought that the Murray-Darling Basin was formed about 60 million years ago. That was when the eastern highlands of Australia were formed by a process of folding and uplifting. From an Aboriginal perspective, some Dreaming stories however, describe how the River Murray was created by Ngurunderi chasing Pondi, the giant cod.

From a geographical perspective the river evolved about 6 million years ago, when the sea invaded the western part of the Basin and retreated again. After the retreat, the fore-runner of the River Murray flowed in a shallow valley which is now the course of the lower Murray.

Aboriginal people and the River Murray

Aboriginal people have had a kinship association with the Murray and Darling Rivers for more than 30,000 years and possibly as long as 50,000 years. The river systems have been a source of fresh drinking water and an important area for hunting and gathering food. Freshwater environments played an important role in Aboriginal life and influenced the seasonal movements of Aboriginal groups.

Historical accounts reveal that the rivers were important areas for obtaining food and water. Camp sites were usually located near water and groups would congregate near a particular locality at certain times of the year for ceremonies or when seasonal food sources were plentiful.

Many Aboriginal people continue to live in or near the Murray and Darling Rivers, many also live in the urban users region, and their history, culture and connection to particular stories and environments remains very important.

Food from the river environment

"... the Australian Aborigine from at least thirty-two thousand years ago until the beginning of this century lived along the Murray-Darling, harvesting the resource of that environment in a way which did not destroy it. ... Aborigines had formed an equilibrium with the river which persisted for tens of thousands of years. ...they developed a mystical relationship with their lands along the river which made them part of the land, the water and the other creatures who shared the area with them."

(Davis, 1978 p21)

"...We lived about four miles out of Swan Reach. My parents were licensed fishermen...We'd come to the Riverland seasonally to pick grapes, cut apricots and

then go back for the fishing season. We'd catch Murray cod, callop, bream, catfish, tench, thunderi, and old bony bream... We would catch lobsters too, freshwater cray, bigger than a yabby and blue with white stripes with big powerful claws and beautiful eating. We had to be wary of Tiger snakes. We ate swan's eggs, coot eggs, water han, teal duck's eggs, black duck's eggs... We would trap native water rats using traps and sell the skins for about four shillings, They've got big ears and longer thinner tails. We had bush tucker like quandongs, wild foods along the river, yams, thalgis".

Colin Cook (a Ngarrindjeri man and well respected leader from the River Murray)
Source: Pring, A. Ngarrindjeri People and Environment. Past, Present and Future.
DETE, 1999 pp 45-46

The river and the adjoining lands are rich environments and are areas with reliable food resources. These include fish, shellfish, yabbies (and other crustaceans), frogs, waterbirds and a range of edible plants. Land resources include mammals, reptiles, birds and plant foods. The Aboriginal people fished in the rivers, hunted on the land and gathered plant foods from both areas.

Weirs were constructed across the dry riverbed and when the waters began to flow again, fish were trapped behind the weir and could be easily caught. Nets were also used in fishing in the river. Small nets were made from stringy bark fibre (from eucalypt bark) and the larger ones, up to 100m long by 2m wide, were made of fibre which was made by chewing bulrush roots.

Freshwater mussels and crustaceans were also collected for food. Water birds and their eggs were taken during the nesting season. Others were hunted with sticks or boomerangs. Plants provided a valuable source of food. Probably the most important foods were those with edible roots such as bulrush, water ribbons (*Triglochis* ssp.) and club-rushes.

Source: adapted from On the Trail of Clean Water, Riverland Water, 1999

Sources – material used in this section has been cited from the following resources:

Cole, Keith (1982). The Aborigines of Victoria. Keith Cole Publications, Bendigo, Victoria.
Davis, Peter L. (1978) Man and the Murray. New South Wales University Press.
Pring, A. (1999) Ngarrindjeri People and Environment. Past, Present and Future Department of Education, Training and Employment, Adelaide.
Southern Murray Basin Resource Kit (1993). Murray-Darling Basin Commission and Victoria Archaeological Survey.
van Waarden, Nora (1993). Aboriginal Use of Water-related Resources. The Victoria Archaeological Survey, Albert Park, Victoria.

Investigate...

Investigate how Aboriginal people lived on and near the river from prior to European settlement to today. Research their ways of relating to, protecting and preserving the river and surrounding areas.

Invite a speaker to talk to you about traditional river use, river care and the

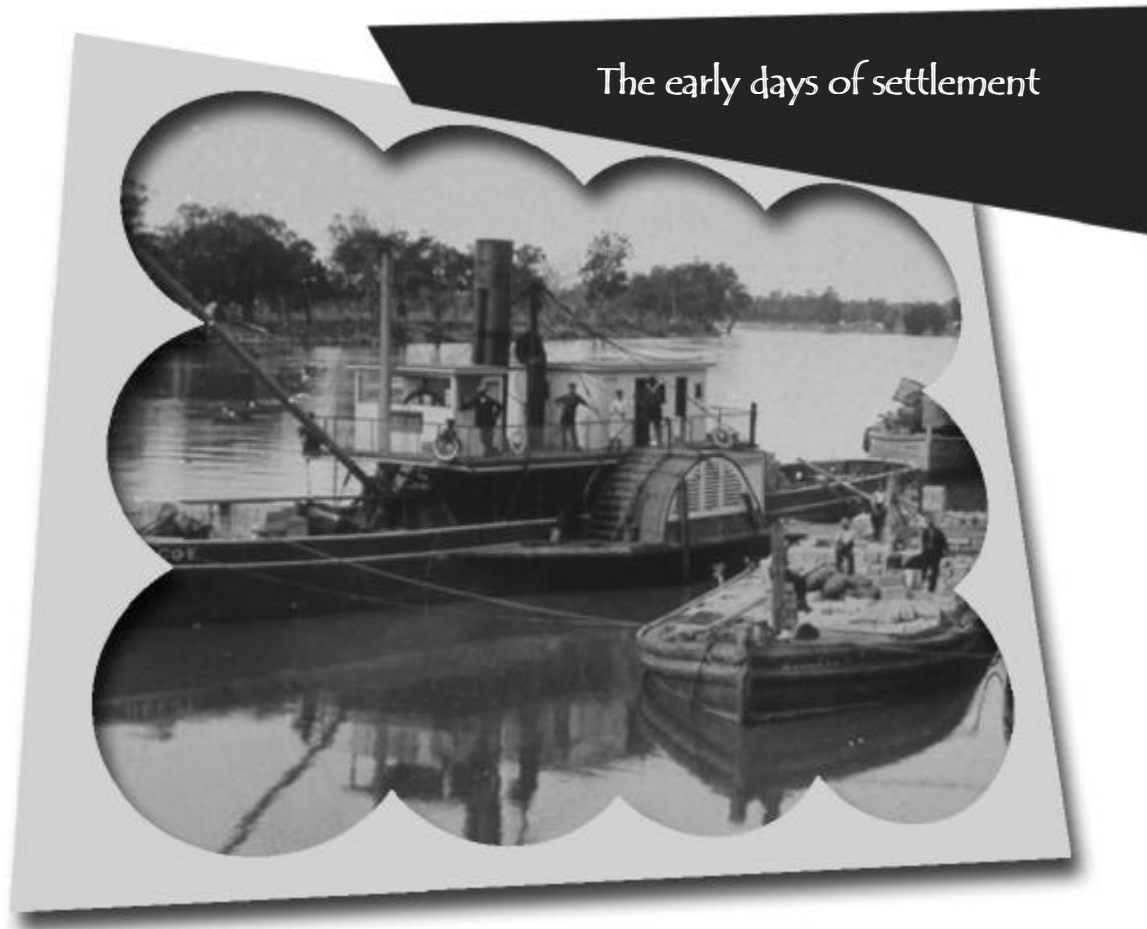
changes they have seen in their lifetime.

Read some Dreaming stories to learn more about the importance of the River Murray to Aboriginal people.

(See Pring. A. (1999) Ngarrindjeri People and Environment. Past, Present and Future).

See the River Exhibition and develop understandings about the relationships between the Aboriginal people and the river and how they cared for and protected it.

European Settlement and the use of the River Murray



Loading the paddlesteamer 'Decoy', c. 1890s

The first European to travel the length of the River Murray was Captain Charles Sturt in 1829-30. He was wanting to establish a route for overlanding stock from New South Wales to the new colony in South Australia. By the 1860s the Murray-Darling river system had become an important trade corridor and the river boat trade reached its peak late last century.

Swampland reclamation projects commenced near Wellington in the 1880s and pasture irrigated agriculture grew rapidly in the area.

With the settlement of Europeans, land near the river was cleared for many purposes, and animal and plant species not native to Australia were introduced.

In 1887 an irrigation colony to grow tree fruits and grape vines was started at Renmark by the Chaffey brothers from Canada. This became the Renmark Irrigation Area in 1893 and was followed by 11 communal Irrigation Village Settlements in what became known as the Riverland. Irrigation projects were started or expanded at Mobilong and Burdett in 1903 and at Renmark, Cadell, Cobdogla, Waikerie, Kingston and Berri in 1920.

The River Murray Commission was formed in 1917 to coordinate the construction and operation of river flow regulating structures. The construction of a series of 11 weirs and locks commenced in 1913 and was completed by 1939. Barrages were built in Lake Alexandrina and land around the lower lakes area was developed for irrigation.

The first pipeline taking water from the River Murray to the Iron Triangle (the Morgan-Whyalla pipeline) was commissioned in 1944. The Mannum-Adelaide pipeline was completed in 1954 and augmented Adelaide's reservoir water supply.

Other pipelines were commissioned in the period 1967-1973 - a second pipeline to Whyalla, the Swan Reach-Stockwell pipeline, the Murray Bridge-Onkaparinga pipeline and the Taillem Bend-Keith pipeline. The Dartmouth Dam was completed in 1979 and South Australia's water entitlement was increased to 1850 GL per annum. The same period saw the implementation of a number of salinity control schemes upstream from South Australia. Drainage disposal and groundwater interception schemes were commenced in the Riverland in the early 1980s.

The Murray experienced the largest flood since European settlement in 1956. Widespread damage to agricultural properties and townships occurred. This resulted in the construction of the Menindee Lakes storage area to store high Darling River flows.

Source: On the trail of clean water, Riverland Water, 1999.

Source material used in this section has been cited from the following resources.

Davis, Peter L. (1978). Man and the Murray. New South Wales University Press.

Crabb, Peter (1977). Murray-Darling Basin Resources. Murray Darling Basin Commission, ACT.

Investigate...

The different ways people engineer rivers to regulate our water supplies.

How problems with earlier land clearing for irrigation has lead to salinity problems today.