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# Interview with Lachie Carracher: Living Water Heritage, a Digital Platform for Indigenous Knowledge Valorization of Martuwarra

**Interview with Lachie Carracher**
**By Carlien Donkor**

**Abstract**
The Martuwarra (Fitzroy River) in the Kimberley Region of North West Australia is a National Heritage site, recognized for its cultural and biodiversity values. This interview explores the conceptual and ethnographic process of creating Living Water Heritage, an online exhibition showcasing the catchment and First Australian Traditional Owners. The project showcases how Indigenous communities are making their voices heard in a modernizing and extractive world faced with climate challenges, and are working to protect their cultural and natural heritage in line with sustainable development.

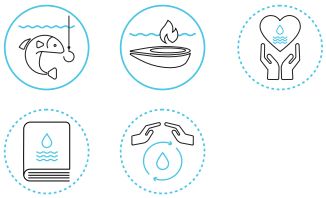
**Policy Recommendations**

- The Western Australian government should take action to promote and protect the Matuwarra watershed.
- Ban fracking across the state of Western Australia.
- Invest in conservation economies rather than extractive ones.

KEYWORDS

Digitization
Martuwarra
First Australians
Living water heritage
Sustainable development

WATER ICONS



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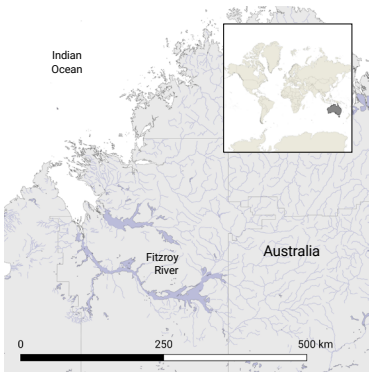



< Fig. 1 A section of the Martuwarra (Fitzroy River) Catchment (Source: Lachie Carracher, 2017).

## Introduction

**INTERVIEWER | Carlien Donkor: Welcome Lachie Carracher. Thank you for joining me today for this interview for *Blue Papers*. Can you give us a brief summary of the project you've been working on for the last three years?**

**INTERVIEWEE | Lachie Carracher:** The Martuwarra (Fitzroy River) is a catchment in the northwest of Australia. First Australians, Australia's "first people," or Traditional Owners have been managing the River since the beginning of time. In 2016 a group of Traditional Owners, came together and signed the Fitzroy River declaration, which was agreed upon as a code of practice for the management of the River. From that, the River Council was formed, which is an alliance of elders and senior knowledge holders from the catchment, which encompasses 10 different Indigenous languages. The Martuwarra Council consistently works to ensure the health and well-being of the river and its people.

As a project manager working for the Martuwarra Fitzroy River Council, I have just completed working with the Council on the Living Water Heritage virtual exhibition, which was set up to improve access to and awareness of heritage values associated with the Martuwarra.

## Community Engagement and Governance

**Carlien Donkor: Since the Martuwarra Council was set up, has there been more interest from people participating and from the community?**

**Lachie Carracher:** The amazing thing about the Martuwarra Council is that people want to be there. It's different from other organizations in the region. People are on the Council because they are speaking up for the future of the River, they choose to be there. There is also the Youth Council, which represents the young leaders, the next generation of senior people, and they engage in projects throughout the nation, improving awareness and understanding of the River. I am incredibly privileged to work with such an inspirational group of people.

There are a few people working in the organization, two working full-time. Support is growing, and a lot of people are taking interest in the River and the work the Council does. Many people are wanting to get involved and come to Martuwarra to experience this amazing place and to work in any capacity with the council.

**Carlien Donkor: How do you support the projects and activities you're working on?**

**Lachie Carracher:** The organization runs on philanthropic donations and is not government funded, with the exception of major projects like the Living Water Heritage virtual museum. The Martuwarra Council also engages with academic institutions. For example, there are currently three PhD candidates working with the Council on their doctoral research. From the beginning of my time with the Council the door has been open for support from people who come with good ethics and the intention of broadening understanding and appreciation for why the Martuwarra needs to be protected.

**Carlien Donkor: That's great! We noticed that you're part of the Global Network of Water Museums (WAMU-NET). Why did you choose to join?**

**Lachie Carracher:** I was put into contact with Eriberto Eulisse from WAMU-NET two years ago. The reason to join was to improve awareness, engagement and the visibility of this amazing part of the world that we call the Kimberley and Martuwarra.

**Carlien Donkor: Has it helped your objectives so far? And what are your expectations from your WAMU-NET membership?**

**Lachie Carracher:** It's good to be part of a global community of people working in the water sector. The opportunity to attend the 10th World Water Forum in Indonesia was fantastic, to be able to connect with various inspirational, powerful leaders in the water sector. So that was a really good result from being part of the network.

### Challenges, Protection and Cultural Continuity

**Carlien Donkor: You've said a lot about raising awareness and visibility. Don't you feel there may be some threats in that? Because sometimes, when heritage sites and communities become exposed, let's say to the outside world, there's a risk of infiltration of foreign values and cultures, especially with tourism. So how have you also tried to keep your community "untouched"?**

**Lachie Carracher:** The Kimberley is constantly under threat. The saving grace for the region has been its remoteness and the lack of economically viable transport for extractive industries. But now that those factors are changing, the main challenges that we're facing are the threats to the river and its environmental well-being. Fracking is banned in 98 per cent of Western Australia, but the remaining two per cent, which isn't banned, is right in the middle of the Martuwarra watershed. So, we are constantly working to ensure that fracking doesn't destroy the River and fracture the backbone of the Country. Water extraction is another ongoing threat. The proposal to dam the River was put forth in 2017 by a New South Wales agricultural company, KIMCO. Nowadays, people are considering floodplain harvesting, groundwater extraction.

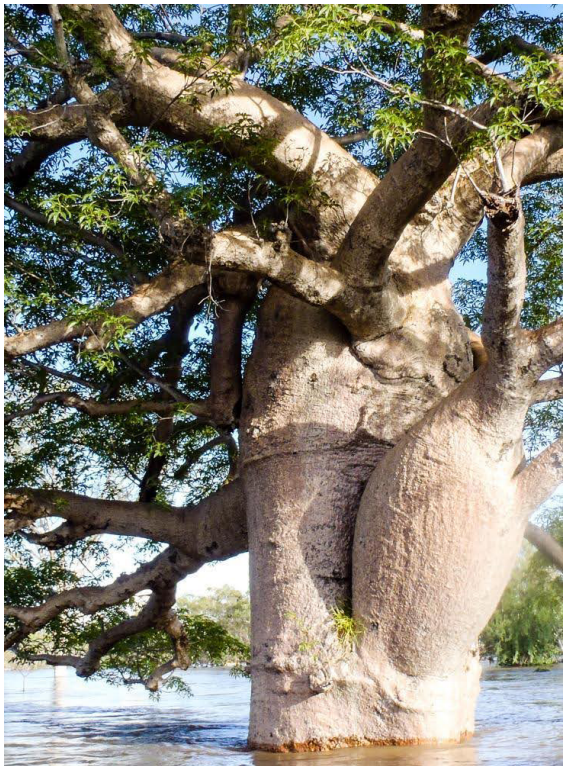
^ Fig. 2 Painting of Ancestral Serpent Beings (Artist: Llyod Kwilla; Source: livingwaterheritage.org, 2024).

You also mentioned threats of cultural discontinuity. With its work, the Martuwarra Council aims to safeguard cultural and traditional knowledge. For instance, the Council engages with various groups on cultural mapping exercises and to ensure that information is kept safe for generations to come.

**Carlien Donkor: Has national heritage inscription helped? And how does the water heritage you're trying to protect and promote also help address other challenges?**

**Lachie Carracher:** Martuwarra and the West Kimberley was listed as a National Heritage Site in 2011. The inscription put together multifaceted heritage values associated with the catchment, precisely its connection to the Ancestral Serpent Beings. There's a lot of rock art here, arguably, some of the oldest in the world. Just down the road there's an archaeological site which has been dated to 48,000 years old. However, the River would also qualify as world heritage for its ecological value alone. For example, it has the largest population of freshwater sawfish, *Pristis pristis*, on Earth which is number one on the EDGE list as an evolutionary, distinct, greatly endangered species. And this is the last stronghold for them, here on Martuwarra.

National heritage inscription helps to raise awareness and to bring people along on the journey. It has offered elements of protection for the river. Protection of the river is very complicated and there are many layers needed to protect the place. The Living Water Heritage exhibition aims to improve engagement with – and understanding of – this globally unique watershed. The area is vast and remote, and not many people are as fortunate as I am to experience being with the River, and to feel the power of that place.



^ Fig. 3 The Martuwarra has many endangered plant and animal species (Source: livingwaterheritage.org, 2024).

**Digital Heritage, Future Visions and World Heritage Aspirations**

**Carlien Donkor: You just mentioned the Living Water Heritage virtual museum. Can you tell us a bit more about the idea behind it, what it entails, how long you've been working on it for and so on?**

**Lachie Carracher:** The project was funded by the Federal Government of Australia, and it aims to improve access and engagement with the national heritage values associated with the West Kimberley. We include the River as the narrative to weave all these values together under three themes: Culture, Country and Truth. Each theme has its own simple introduction which is very visual and easy to digest. But then you go

deeper and get into full articles and exhibits. There are many topics covered including biodiversity, river ecology, geology, saltwater, the Devonian reef, fire and water, and archaeology.

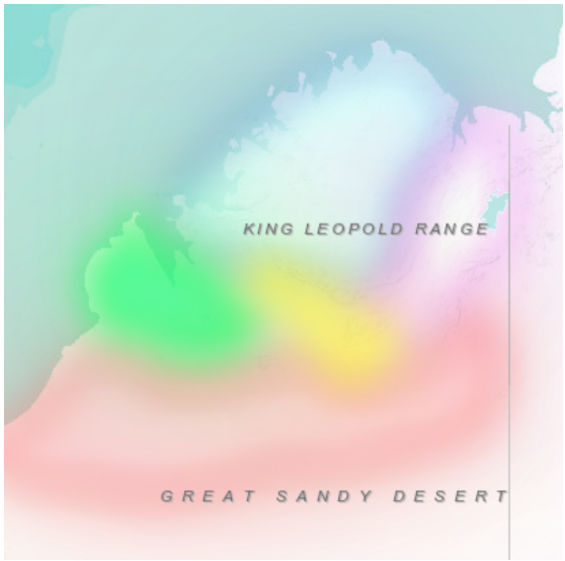
Throughout 2024, my dear friend Mark Coles Smith and I travelled around the catchment, speaking with various communities and groups, trying to find a way to articulate why the area is globally significant. The project champions the need for just development on just terms in line with both the National Heritage criteria and Traditional Owners' voices, while prioritizing the voices of the First Australians of the region.

Talking about Indigenous language within the region, the Kimberley is one of the most linguistically diverse in Australia. The idea was to make something map-centric to explain to someone, perhaps from another country, that with language comes highly specific bio-regional knowledge, which has evolved over thousands of years of intimate observation and landscape-scale sustainable management. But how can we visually articulate this? As an idea, I grouped the First Australian languages by family (there are five different language families in the catchment) and then I overlaid that on top of the Interim Biogeographic Regionalisation for Australia (IBRA) dataset which classifies Australia's landscapes into geographically distinct bioregions based on common climate, geology, landform, native vegetation and species information. Guess what? It was a perfect match! This is nothing surprising when you listen to Indigenous Knowledge Holders but it is another prime example of how significant Indigenous knowledge is. I wonder how much the Australian Government spends on its national bio-regional mapping project when it was already completed thousands of years ago by Traditional Owners.

The National Heritage inscription was in 2011, meeting every possible criterion, but when I would speak to Traditional Owners and say, for example, “There are fossils from your Country, which are of national significance," the response was, “I don't know anything about fossils. But I can take you to my Country, and I'll show you why it's important." I did not make the mistake of starting a conversation with “Why is the specific area of National Heritage value?" I just followed and listened. The road was longer but the result was much richer and more authentic than we could have initially dreamed.

For instance, the “Truth" theme came out loudly as a unified narrative throughout the catchment, although it was not as prolifically mentioned in the National Heritage description. As a result, we discovered some incredible media deep in the national and state archives concerning colonization in the Kimberley, the arrival of the pastoral industry, Indigenous resistance to European invasion, and what I call colonial institutions: missions, stations, police and ration camps. We commissioned archival films to be digitized and repatriated to Community, some of which are included in the exhibition.

So it was a massive undertaking and we compiled some incredible material and worked tirelessly on the research, digging through the archives and putting together a virtual exhibition  which is heavy on visual media and map-centric elements. It's aimed at a broad audience but also has enough detail that if you want, you can really take a deep dive into various values which have been highlighted both for National Heritage and by First Australians. It is about 38,000 words, with 20 two-minute videos that are very visually focused and it's publicly available for you.




^ Fig. 4 Map showing overlay of the Bunuban, Nyulnyulan, Jarrakan, Pama-Nyungan and Worrorran language families (Source: livingwaterheritage.org, 2024).

**Carlien Donkor: You mentioned you want to get a broad audience. What does promotion look like locally and globally? Are community members aware of this platform that has been created? And how are they interacting with it?**

**Lachie Carracher:** It's just gone live. We are working with state libraries from around Australia to feature the projects and also working with educational institutions so they can use it as a tool and get people to engage with all the gathered material. We are always open to ideas so let people know they can reach out if they would like to learn more or engage with the exhibition and Martuwarra in general.

**Carlien Donkor: Congratulations! What would you like to see in the future of your museum?**

**Lachie Carracher:** It would be great to see the conversation with Traditional Owners continue on the theme of World Heritage listing for the River because it is an incredibly rich, globally unique, interconnected heritage landscape that I believe should be protected and enjoyed by future generations.

**Carlien Donkor: We noticed that the UNESCO site Purnululu National Park is also in your vicinity. Do you currently have relations with the site managers or do you see possible connections? For instance how can it help to promote Martuwarra?**

**Lachie Carracher:** Yes, it's just outside the Martuwarra catchment. It's great that Purnululu is inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list and is a site that is globally recognized in the Kimberley. This is good to raise awareness for the region. We'd like to see more of that in the future and I hope that Martuwarra can join the ranks of Purnululu.

**Carlien Donkor: And what would Matuwara need to become listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site?**

**Lachie Carracher:** In my opinion, we need to improve engagement with – and awareness of – the area, especially to help decision makers. For small organisations, funding is always needed and more human capital to help bring everyone along.

## Conclusion

**Carlien Donkor: Last question. If you could send a message to any leader or policy maker or relevant stakeholder, either locally or internationally, who would you choose and what would you say?**

**Lachie Carracher:** I would like to see the Western Australian government take action to protect Martuwarra and the catchment for future

generations, so that would mean banning fracking for starters, protecting Martuwarra and investing in economies that are not based on extraction, but conservation. I believe the current federal government agrees, as do local people and a large community abroad, so the message would have to go to Roger Cook who is the premier of Western Australia: protect Martuwarra.

**Acknowledgment**
This contribution was peer-reviewed. It was edited by members of the editorial team of the UNESCO Chair Water, Ports and Historic Cities: Carola Hein and Matteo D'Agostino.

**Useful Links**
www.martuwarra.org
www.livingwaterheritage.org

**Lachie Carracher** has always centered his life around wild rivers. He has worked in conservation economies throughout Canada, Uganda, Nepal, Sumatra, Laos and Colombia. This unique life experience has provided a valuable depth of knowledge which he now brings to the West Kimberley and specifically the Martuwarra Fitzroy River. Lachie continues to build his relationship with Martuwarra Fitzroy River Country by hearing, feeling and learning from everyone and everything around him.

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**Carlien Donkor** is a PhD candidate at the African Studies Centre Leiden (ASCL), interested in traditional ingenuity and historical practices of living on and with water, and their positioning in inclusive development frameworks. Her experience as an architect and project manager, combines research, design and construction for climate-resilient and context-sensitive solutions. She was among the winners of the EU Sparks hackathon in which The Nettuniani proposal was awarded the best solution for climate adaptation. Other interests include community collaborations and multimedia installations.

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