



Interview with Anne Poelina | Sustaining Intergenerational Guardianship and Equity for the Martuwarra Catchment

Interview with Anne Poelina 
By Carlien Donkor 

Abstract

The Martuwarra (Fitzroy River) Council has been established by senior elders, including Anne Poelina, to represent different parts of the river. The interview explores the history of the Council and its goals for holistic development based on what they call “forever” economies. Dr. Poelina explains the Council’s diverse ways of promoting intergenerational equity through the Youth Council, their conservation plan with the nine native title groups and the reason the Martuwarra (Fitzroy River) Council joined the Global Network of Water Museums (WAMU-NET) as a living museum. This interview also serves as an introduction to the Living Water Heritage project discussed in this issue of *Blue Papers* by Lachie Carracher.

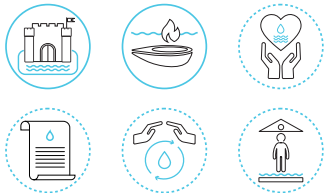
Policy Recommendations

- Local leaders should champion intergenerational laws of equity that guarantee the well-being of young people with a holistic approach to the watershed.

KEYWORDS

Martuwarra
Governance
Ancestral personhood
Indigenous knowledge
Sustainable livelihoods

WATER ICONS



< Fig. 1 The Martuwarra (Fitzroy River) embodies ancestral knowledge of water, land and people (Source: Lachie Carracher, 2017).



Introduction

INTERVIEWER | Carlien Donkor: Welcome Anne Poelina, chair and professor of Indigenous knowledge at the Nulungu Research Institute. Thank you for agreeing to this interview; we are privileged to have you here with us. Can you please give us an introduction to your community and also to your work?

INTERVIEWEE | Anne Poelina: The Martuwarra (Fitzroy River) Council was set up because all the Indigenous nations that are connected to the sacred river came together in 2016 and drafted what we call the Fitzroy River Declaration. Within two years, there had been quite a lot of development and conversation between the state government and people in the region about the potential for a water plan for the Fitzroy River watershed, and that required a whole lot of stakeholders to come together. One of the things that Indigenous people have been doing since the beginning of time in this region is coming together in a bicultural model to talk about how we share information, how we co-operate and how we are organized to be able to look after this magnificent system for the greater good of all, particularly our nonhuman kin (fig. 1). In this case, we came together under one of the senior elders who said, importantly, “We need to stand in unity and be organized” – to speak with one voice and one mind. Together, we formed the Martuwarra (Fitzroy River) Council made up of the native title, traditional owners and diverse Indigenous groups. We co-developed the Fitzroy River Catchment Management Plan (2020) for this system, which then made us consider the need to be united in our position about the development of our lands, water and resources going forward. As the group started to grow, we decided that we needed to follow a model of bottom-up governance, especially in terms of representing the voices of the people.

The Martuwarra (Fitzroy River) Council is led by very, very senior elders of high degree, but at the same time we formed a young leaders council to ensure that our knowledge is transferred to young people and that we are investing in intergenerational equity, love and care.

Sustainability, Knowledge and Global Dialogue

Carlien Donkor: How do your activities as river custodians relate to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?

Anne Poelina: The SDGs are benchmarks but one of the things that we are saying as Indigenous people is that for us, it's not just about sustainable development. It's about sustainable lifeways and livelihoods. We want to expand the definition of sustainability because we come from a holistic society, and we've always governed under the principles of land, water and people being intrinsically entwined. Our priority is ensuring that our work captures and protects the lifeways and livelihoods that we have pursued from the beginning of time.

This includes governance, leadership and starting to build what we call “forever” industries: economies based on culture, conservation science, regeneration and healing of the land and the waters, not extraction. So from that perspective, it's really a bottom-up governance mechanism that we have used from the beginning of time that has always been managed on scale because we need not separate land, water and people. Today that conversation includes settler society, so we are very much concerned about articulating our approach in a way that shows it is in the broad public interest. And we want to make sure that the evidence that we generate of the need for

just development is accessible and of peer review quality. So we're producing very high-caliber reports. We're working with multiple universities to make sure we have the evidence base to position ourselves as experts in how to sustain this river system for generations to come.

Carlien Donkor: That's very impressive. You mentioned the river management plan. Can you expand on that? Does it involve a collaboration with the government, or who are the contributors besides the elders who are involved in this?

Anne Poelina: When we wrote a conservation plan with the nine native title groups, which are the very big nation groups that really connect all the rivers, we looked at the whole of the catchment from scale including the diversity of our cultures and the cultural landscape as well as biodiversity. We asked, "What are the multiple values of preserving what we have now to ensure that this biodiversity is here and able to benefit the region and different economies, but in a sustaining way, not just for extraction purposes?" The government funded the development of the plan because at a commonwealth level, the value of the river was recognized under national heritage. And in fact, this river system is globally unique. One of the things that we are working on with the Commonwealth Government and the Indigenous leaders on the ground is looking at how we can showcase and spotlight this watershed as being globally unique and of World Heritage value, specifically through the Living Water Heritage project. This project includes an interactive map to show the biodiversity that's here so that we can value it and protect it; as biodiversity diminishes around the world, it becomes more and more valuable. What we refer to as the economics of well-being is sustaining what we have rather than destroying it.

Carlien Donkor: Okay, so my next question relates to the Global Network of Water Museums (WAMU-NET). How did you hear about them? And why did you choose to join?

Anne Poelina: I was introduced to WAMU-NET by a professor in Australia who spoke to us about this concept of a living water museum and asked if we want to build a living water museum to showcase this globally unique system and the diversity of cultures and biodiversity here. I didn't even need to think about it because what is here is so globally unique and so diverse. The valley tracks are uplifted, and they're folded and fractured, and they're diverse. This gives us an opportunity to showcase what Mother Earth has provided as a sacred and significant place. And so we were able to come together and say that we really need to showcase what is here and help to preserve what we've got through this opportunity to share it with the world. Even though we're way off here at the top of the northwest of Australia, we see ourselves as global citizens, and we see this watershed as having value to Mother Nature, to humanity and to Mother Earth.

Carlien Donkor: What are some of your expectations for this network that you've joined?

Anne Poelina: I think it is really to learn from each other about how to be brave, how to be creative and how to think outside the box in terms of how we showcase these globally unique bodies of water and what the relationships between human and nonhuman can be in the context of these magnificent waterways. Culture plays an important part in that because culture includes the stories from the past, the context of what we are doing now in the present, and serves as a basis for looking to the future in terms of how we can preserve

these global assets not just for the short term, but for generations to come.

Climate Justice, Water Rights and Systemic Threats

Carlien Donkor: Can you tell us about the current relationship between water management and heritage management in Australia? And then coming back to your context, how does your work bridge the two sectors?

Anne Poelina: I think this is a really interesting question. At the beginning of this year, I was a commissioner for water rights across this country as part of the National Water Initiative. So, I was able to look at how water engagement was happening across this whole nation, in the different jurisdictions, in the different place-based areas of Australia. I was able to see how we were working together to ensure we had water security. We come from the driest continent on the planet, where water is so scarce that it is now being seen as the new gold, but for Indigenous Australians, it has always been valued as more important than gold. I am the first inaugural Indigenous scientist appointed to the Murray-Darling basin. I was looking at that situation in terms of how we learn from the Murray-Darling basin: How do we not repeat the mistakes of the South in the North where I live?

All of this information comes together in a way that helps me ground the work that I'm doing in my state-based place of work in terms of the Fitzroy River catchment. What can I learn from the Murray-Darling basin? What can I learn from having a wider lens, looking at our nation and seeing that two of the greatest things missing in this country are trust capital and water security? These are two assets that

we don't have very good ways of being able to build on and strengthen. This is a challenge we've got now, and we as Indigenous people are saying, "We need to go back to what we call bottom-up, polycentric governance, governing from a bioregional perspective – governing from a biocultural perspective, where we bring our voices into water management, planning into water management and allocation into water management because we are living on our lands and waters."

As I said earlier, we do not separate land, water, people and the environment. They are all intrinsically entwined. What we are saying to fellow Australians is that we have approached water governance this way from the beginning of time. This ancient wisdom needs to be factored into efforts to ensure water security in this country at a time of great climate change and great uncertainty. What we are advocating for as Indigenous leaders is the need to bring the voices and the wisdom of Indigenous people into better water planning and governance and to look at how we can ensure that these sacred places of water can help us as human beings and our nonhuman kin to survive the challenges of climate change and water scarcity in a just manner.

Carlien Donkor: What are some of the challenges you've been facing? And what are some of the threats to the heritage you're trying to protect?

Anne Poelina: One of the things I'm advocating for in our country is that we need to see and value Indigenous knowledge as Indigenous science. We are the first scientists, geologists, anthropologists, archaeologists who built all the systems that we see on Earth. I'm really pushing hard for the recognition of Indigenous and traditional knowledge as multidisciplinary

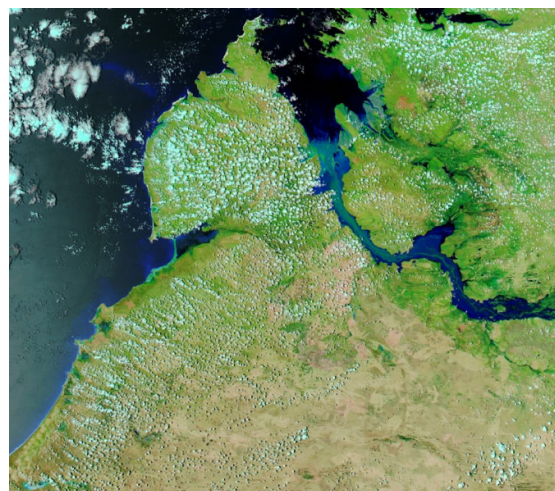
Indigenous science. Then we can start to have equal weighting and valuing of our knowledge systems, and we can bring that in to deal with the complexity of the current situation. What we're talking about, particularly in relation to sustainable development, sustainable livelihoods and sustainable lifeways, is the importance of ensuring that all of this information comes together so that we can have bicultural governance with Indigenous people that will allow us to get organized, get our systems thinking correct, and then go on to a much bigger bioregional concept. We need to be managing these systems on scale, particularly in terms of the diversity of the systems that we're talking about. One of the things that we are doing is working with very interesting people from different universities on how to really understand the opportunity cost of preserving somewhere, like the Martuwarra (Fitzroy River) watershed as having global value, that it is contributing to the well-being, the planetary health of the Mother Earth and humanity, and that around the world we really need to be spotlighting these places where we have this level of integrity and care and be really understanding that we're really talking about a total systems approach.



Youth, Future Vision and Global Advocacy

Carlien Donkor: I think it's very important, to create a body of young leaders, young movers, who are going to inherit what you leave behind, as you have done. You talked about trying to become a good ancestor more than a good professor. So how are the youth embracing this responsibility that is given them? And how are they also propagating this work beyond the catchment of the Fitzroy River?

Anne Poelina: We have a group of young leaders whom we are investing heavily in by making sure we strengthen their capacity. We transfer this knowledge and give them a greater understanding, even just the understanding of what colonialism is, for our young people need to understand that they were born into a world not of postcolonialism but that colonialism exists today and that these unjust development projects are politically driven by the economics of greed. Another thing to understand about working with our youth is understanding that they have different skill sets than we elders do and valuing them for their ability to bring different forms of media such as Instagram, TikTok and all of these channels to send our story



^ Fig. 2 Impact of 2023 flood in West Kimberley (Source: Living Water Heritage-Life with Martuwarra, 2024, based on NASA imagery).

out into the world. We want to value our young people. We want to lift them up. We want to hold them and say that we care about you, we love you and we respect you. We understand that you have got skills and knowledge and competence that we don't have as elders.

How do we work together to ensure that this knowledge we create can be shared not only with each other in our nations and tribes, but also with settler society? How do we reach out and look at what young people are doing globally and help them to connect with each other so that they can build and strengthen their capacity to be good storytellers and guardians? How do we connect them with the universities and the conservation and green groups so that they can understand that we need multiple resources to ensure that there is intergenerational equity? As elders and ancestors, we want to leave our region and planet in a better and more fit state than when we inherited it. We rely on our young leaders, particularly if we ever need to resort to strategic litigation, to protect Martuwarra. We would see that this is the due inheritance of our young leaders. They will be the ones who will stand up and provide support in any legal cases. So young people are really the essence of what we are doing, and we are bringing them with us. Their skill sets and technical competence allow ancient wisdom to work with contemporary ways of sharing stories across the globe, and they are really stepping up.

Carlien Donkor: I'm inspired by all the work you're doing, especially in setting an example and taking a lead in discussions about inter-generational exchanges.

Anne Poelina: Yes, and that's because we say young people are living now. Everyone thinks they're the future, but they're living now. They've

got big dreams. Our job is to help them reach their full potential as human beings. There's a very interesting paper my daughter and I have written called "Dreaming A Climate Chance," which argues for Earth-centered governance (Poelina et al 2024).

Carlien Donkor: This brings us to my next question. What then is the future that you envision for the Martuwarra (Fitzroy River) Council and the entire river catchment area?

Anne Poelina: We are really spotlighting this globally unique watershed and showing that this system is not found anywhere else on the planet, so the cost to save it, to preserve it and to share the new economies it supports are worth it. We've started to create walking trails along the river to bring people to the river. We can allow them to engage with the river and build their own relationship.

The big, important investment that we are looking to secure is the opportunity to build this bicultural bioregional framework and manage the commons for the greater good of all of us, as we have done from the beginning of time. We support everyone and everything around us. This is not Indigenous versus non-Indigenous. This is all of us as human beings trying to make sense of the world and create a chance to stabilize the climate.

Carlien Donkor: And what do you need to get to this future vision?

Anne Poelina: Like many other Indigenous people across the globe, what I need is serious investment. The nature-repair-positive market, which is different from the carbon trading story, shows that if we regenerate and heal the land and heal people, we can heal the climate. For us, it's about regeneration of carbon, not

extraction. This is a moment in time when we can have the culture, conservation, science and tourism economies as opposed to economies based on oil and gas, destruction of the land, destruction of every living thing around us and potentially creating the largest man-made destruction on the planet. What we're saying in our dream is that we can build forever industries based on the economics of well-being. We understand that we can do this. I'm referring to the conversation that Nelson Mandela started about global geoparks, about biosphere reserves, about walking the country and about the diversity of plant and animal species not found anywhere else. The people here are culturally diverse and great guardians and custodians. We are in a moment in time when we can create and transform and build something beautiful and new based on the rich wisdom of our people; if we don't do this, we will meet our own demise.

Carlien Donkor: You mentioned that Martuwarra is listed as national heritage. How do you plan to get it to UNESCO World Heritage status?

Anne Poelina: The land here in the West Kimberley is 96,000 square kilometers. With the work that Lachie Carracher is doing on the Living Water Heritage project, we want affirmation from the world, once they've looked at our living water museum and the living water maps, that this is a globally unique place. Already world citizens are saying, yes, this should be World Heritage. When people see the work that Lachie has put into this story map, they'll be able to go on to the beautiful films that Mark Coles Smith and Lachie Carracher have created with others and see that we're in a moment in time when these places are rare. They belong to humanity, and we're in a moment in time where we can either choose to love and

care for and nurture this place and allow it to do its good work for the planet or to meet our own demise with the destruction from fracking and extraction for oil and gas.

Conclusion

Carlien Donkor: I have one last question. If you could send a message to any leader, policymaker or relevant stakeholder, whom would you choose? And what would you say?

Anne Poelina: There are so many people. My message would be to the leader of Wales to congratulate them on passing an intergenerational law of equity that stipulates that every law and every policy in that country must factor in the well-being of young people and to ask them to demand that it becomes a law for the world.

Carlien Donkor: Well, thank you so much and it's been a pleasure. You've said many things to inspire our readers as they are working in their own contexts.

Anne Poelina: Thank you.

Acknowledgment

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Useful Links

www.martuwarra.org

www.livingwaterheritage.org

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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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