

Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Values Assessment for the Yan Yean Reservoir catchment Summary Report



Wurundjeri
Woi-wurrung
Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation



Welcome to Country

Wominjeka yearmann koondee
biik Wurundjeri balluk

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This summary document presents the results of the Cultural Values Assessment for the Yan Yean Reservoir catchment, produced by the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation in collaboration with Melbourne Water.

Warning: This document may contain images of deceased persons.

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Cover artwork by Ash Firebrace

Ash Firebrace is an Indigenous artist who works in Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Corporation's Narrap land management team. The artwork represents Wurundjeri families living along the Plenty River and the importance of the eucalypt red gums which were sourced for bark in the reservoir catchment.



Foreword

The Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation (Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Corporation) and Melbourne Water collaborated in 2022 to undertake a Cultural Values Assessment (CVA) of the Yan Yean Reservoir catchment.

The Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people are the traditional custodians of Yan Yean and this study revealed the historical, cultural and heritage significance of the catchment area to the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people. The Yan Yean landscape is home to cultural attributes representing the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung community's connection to their Country including archaeological places, plants, animals and environmental features, and places representing colonial settler and Woi-wurrung interactions.

This report summarises the CVA and outlines the study area's significance to the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people, its cultural features of interest, and recommendations to appropriately protect, manage and celebrate the cultural attributes of this landscape into the future. The findings of the CVA provide a strong foundation for Wurundjeri and Melbourne Water to continue walking Country together at Yan Yean.



Map of Yan Yean Reservoir and catchment area

Background to the Cultural Values Assessment

Melbourne Water is committed to delivering more community benefit from the land it manages on behalf of the community, where it is compatible with current services. Melbourne Water has been investigating the potential to increase community open space and recreational opportunities at Yan Yean Reservoir.

The CVA was initiated by Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Corporation and Melbourne Water as an important foundation for future planning.

The study area consists of the Yan Yean Reservoir and the surrounding catchment, including the Yan Yean Reservoir Park. It is dominated by the Yan Yean Reservoir, formerly a natural wetland, and is bordered by the Plenty River valley to the west and forested ranges to the north and northeast.

The findings of the CVA provide a deeper understanding of the cultural significance of Yan Yean, which is an important foundation not only for the development of a future master plan for the site, but also to inform Wurundjeri, Melbourne Water and others' ongoing work together at Yan Yean.



Knowledge recording with Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Corporation Elders at Yan Yean Reservoir

Project methodology

Over 12 weeks between March and June 2022 a series of activities, including desktop research, field visits and workshops, were carried out to identify the cultural values of the Yan Yean Reservoir catchment. The focus was to capture place-based information relating to how Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people lived within the landscape.

What are cultural values?

In this study, 'cultural values' are understood as the shared beliefs, cultural practices and forms of attachment that Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people may hold in common. In Woi-wurrung Country, we can often find evidence of these values in the form of archaeological remains, which indicate a longstanding relationship to the land and traditional ownership.

While this assessment considered archaeological evidence, its focus was to understand other ways that cultural values are represented in a place, such as living areas, landscapes or features associated with cultural practices, beliefs, Woi-wurrung language and their historical narrative after colonisation.

Reviewing existing records

Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Corporation anthropologists gathered and analysed information from the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Register (archaeological) and documentary and archival record to reconstruct the traditional context of 'people and place'. The Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Register holds all records relating to registered Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Places. Cultural heritage places and objects are the physical evidence of the activities of Aboriginal people living in these regions for thousands of years.

Journals and other personal and family records from pioneering families of the Yan Yean region were reviewed for what they could reveal about the relationships between the local Traditional Owners and the various settler families in the early colonial period.

These records included the files of the Port Phillip Aboriginal Protectorate held at the Public Records Office of Victoria, the manuscript collections of colonial settlers held at the State Library of Victoria and the Royal Historical Society of Victoria.



Gathering Wurundjeri knowledge

Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung knowledge recording took place over two on-Country visits and two workshops with Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Corporation Elders and members. The purpose was to collect insights about the landscape and explore their connection through conversation.

This approach sought to involve a cross-section of Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Corporation people with specialist skills in language and cultural practice, land management, cultural heritage and water management.

As with any research project, the length of time allocated is, inevitably, a limiting factor - more time for research means a greater body of source material can be identified and analysed. We can assume there is more as-yet undiscovered information relating to Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people at Yan Yean, which could potentially extend knowledge and understanding of the cultural values.



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To walk on Country is to emotionally connect with these places, a feeling like nothing else in life. We are gifted with the spiritual, physical, social and cultural connection to Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung land far and wide. As Elders, we are respected and noticed. This is also a privilege and we must share what we have inherited over the years to our future generations.

- Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Elder

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Significance of Yan Yean to Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung People

Origins of people and place

The Yan Yean Reservoir catchment area is located within the traditional Country of the Wurundjeri clan of the Woi-wurrung speaking people. Yan Yean is a place where Wurundjeri carried out their lifeways, raised their children, held dances, hunted, harvested and fished, settled disputes and observed the colonial intruders on their inherited estates.

The environment of Yan Yean featured wetlands, nearby forests and grasslands. These were the right conditions to support Wurundjeri living areas and subsistence through hunting and harvesting as well as providing habitat for totemic birds and animals and creation ancestors. Inscriptions of traditional lifeways are reflected in the cultural places and artefacts found at Yan Yean. These include scarred trees, which have had bark removed by Indigenous people for items such as canoes, willams (dwellings), shields and tarnuks

(water containers). Artefact scatters, often termed lithic artefacts, may be small tools used for cutting and scraping which are found in close spatial association. These important records are registered Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Places within the catchment, signifying a longstanding occupation.

During the era of colonial settlement, the ngurungaeta (leader) of the Wurundjeri families living on this stretch of the Plenty River was documented as Boon-ge-guk (name variations include Old Murry and Murray). His female counterpart/s are unknown. Given the abundant liveable features, the importance of the Plenty River valley, including Yan Yean, to Wurundjeri people could be seen as equivalent to the Yarra River, Jacksons Creek and the Maribyrnong River, although it is not as thoroughly documented.

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Our birth right to our Country is a privilege, inherited from our mother, our grandmother and right back to our ancestors William Barak and Annie Borate. Our ancestors and family made it possible to have rights to Country. They faced the difficult challenges for us and we draw strength from them all.

- Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Elder

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Arrival of colonial settlers

Colonial settlers sought to dispossess Indigenous Victorians from the land and commonly perceived them as an obstacle to their pastoral interests, without the same rights as the British and European people. While there was no documented large-scale conflict between Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people and the colonists at Yan Yean, complaints were made of Indigenous people in the area by some of the settlers. During 1841, an investigation was carried out by the Port Phillip Aboriginal Protectorate which concluded the complaints were unfounded. Although the Protectorate system removed Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people from their Country across the Port Phillip District, Wurundjeri and other East Kulin people continued to live on the Plenty River at Yan Yean and interweave their livelihoods with two colonial families in particular, the Harrison and Bear families.

Historical records show that the Wurundjeri people asserted their custodianship of the land by forming economic and domestic ties with the colonists. They developed a new economy by which labour and the production of food and cultural materials could be sold or traded. They received rations from the Harrisons and harvested potatoes from the farms. Employment was gained on the settler's runs and the settlers' children were cared for, and items of cross-cultural worth were traded by both groups.

One of these events was described as placing the Harrison family forever in their debt. Harrison recalled how one day his youngest sister was playing on a log bridge over the Plenty River and fell in. Being unable to swim, some Wurundjeri women dived in to rescue her from drowning and returned her to the family home.¹

These records give us insight into the ways Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people accommodated and adapted to the rapid environmental and social change brought by the colonial settlers.

At the same time, traditional customs were also maintained, through hunting and harvesting, resolving interclan conflict, and interring ancestral remains. That is, until the construction of the reservoir permanently altered elements of the landscape and brought with it an influx of labourers, publicans and shanty accommodation for hundreds of workers and their families. This made the Yan Yean wetlands and nearby Plenty River uninhabitable, at which time Boon-ge-guk led his people away.

Maintaining traditions in the contact era

The catchment and broader region provided a variety of plant and game species for food, reeds and fibre for jewellery, baskets and nets; pelts and sinews for clothing; and bark and timber for dwellings, canoes, tools and vessels. These items were made and used by the community and also held economic value, being gifted, traded and exchanged with neighbouring and distant Traditional Owners at ceremonial gatherings and meetings. During the contact era, these cultural items, along with eels and lyrebird feathers from the Plenty River area, were incorporated into an economy for survival due to loss of resources from their traditional estates.



Site of the Yan Yean Reservoir 4 March 1851, by Robert Russell.
Source: State Library of Victoria

¹ Mann, L. (1996) *The Plenty Bushrangers of 1842: The first Europeans Hanged in Victoria*. Greensborough: Lindsay Mann, p.82



Yan Yean Reservoir, La Trobe, by Charles Joseph, 1859.
Source: State Library of Victoria



Reeds collected and dried by Wurundjeri women for threading and jewellery. Photo credit: Michelle Mills

Caring for Country

Wurundjeri people do not perceive their Country, its vegetation, wildlife or the historical narrative within it as isolated elements. Instead, they view the landscape holistically and through the ecological biodiversity required for healthy Country. Managing the environmental and topographic features through correct land management practises is understood as 'caring for Country', or Bunjil's law. These responsibilities were handed down over generations and safeguarded the plant and animal species required for diet, clothing and body adornment, tools, weaponry and craft.



From the Yan Yean wetlands, Wurundjeri people harvested aquatic food plants and resources, installed various forms of fish, eel and bird traps, and extracted potable water. The soils at Yan Yean were manually turned to ensure harvests of carbohydrate tuber and root-based vegetables. Fire was applied to the landscape for regenerative purposes and to maintain living areas. The tree canopies of eucalypts, casuarina (she-oaks), and acacia species provided the bark, resins and wood required for canoes, willams, tarnuks, axe handles, digging sticks and other tools, utensils and weapons. The Wurundjeri people relied on healthy Country for sufficient harvests of these materials, so the landscape was carefully managed and shaped by intentional design. This would be similar to how a designed landscape would be managed and cared for in today's time, such as a public park, garden or farm.

Impacts of pastoralism and agriculture

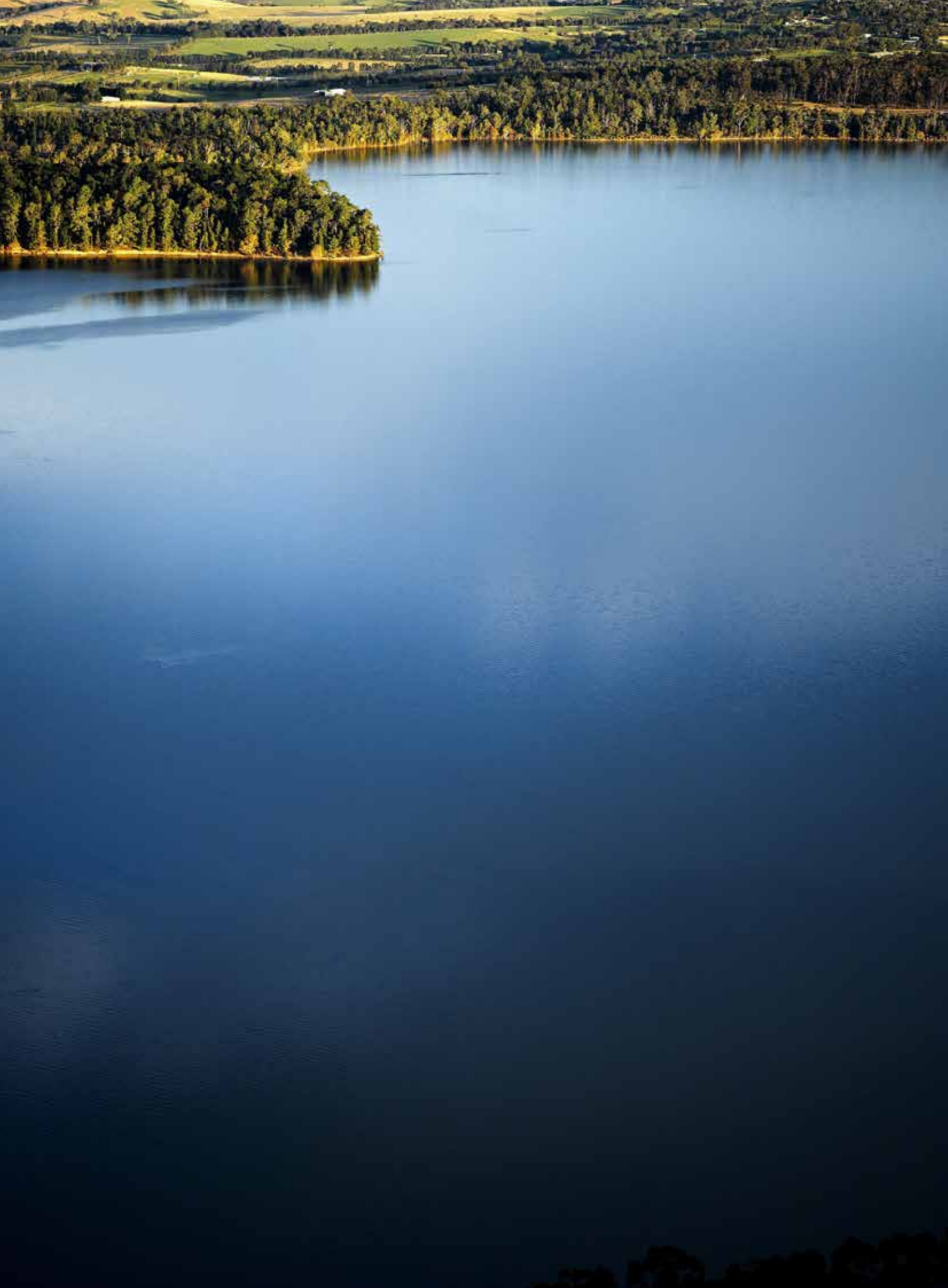
The earliest explorers of the Port Phillip District had realised the pastoral and agricultural potential of the Plenty River, and as a result, the region was fairly quickly given over to grazing once settlement of Whittlesea and Yan Yean began in 1837. Colonial occupation and the expansion of pastoralism in the Yan Yean region caused significant changes to the environment. Forests were cleared for timber, wetlands were drained into the reservoir, and estates that were once freely accessible to Wurundjeri were now fenced off. Traditional land management practices, including the use of fire, were actively discouraged, and native grasslands were eaten down and trampled by livestock. For a time, poor sanitation and farming drainage practices depleted the health of the Plenty River to a state where the water was no longer drinkable.



Eryngium vesiculosum ('prickfoot') regenerating after cultural burns at Yan Yean

Reconnecting to Country

Wurundjeri people continue to carry out their Caring for Country responsibilities at Yan Yean via the Narrap Rangers who have conducted cultural burns and woody weed removal in the catchment. Places which were closed off to Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people after their loss of sovereignty now have new meaning as community reconnect with their ancestral homelands and land management responsibilities.



Cultural features of interest

Through review of historical records and on-Country days and workshops with Elders, the CVA identified cultural features of interest at Yan Yean. These include Victorian Aboriginal Cultural Heritage places, ancestral interment, creation ancestor and totem species, places representing colonial settler and Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung interactions, and reintroduction of traditional knowledge to manage important biodiversity through Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Corporation Narrap Rangers caring for Country.

Cultural Heritage Places

Yan Yean is inscribed with Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Places that are a record of Country and the activities of Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung ancestors. Cultural landscapes and other significant places in Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Country constitute a direct link for Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people to their ancestors who created and cared for those places over millennia. The management and protection of Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Places is in accordance with the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act 2006.



Parish map of Yan Yean region (1860), showing John Bear's land holding north-west of Yan Yean Reservoir. Source: Public Record Office Victoria (VPRS 8168/P0002, RUN420; TOOROURONG)

Wurundjeri living areas within the Plenty River corridor

The Plenty River was central to the socio-cultural life of the Wurundjeri people. From these living areas on the Plenty, people travelled into the Plenty Ranges for lyrebird hunting. Food and resources were hunted and harvested from the Yan Yean wetlands, with people returning to their living areas on the Plenty River for food processing and craftsmanship such as woodworking, weaving, hide preparation and bark preparation.

Short finned eels (*Anguilla australis*) in Yan Yean Reservoir

Eels were a commodity in the traditional Wurundjeri economy. Wetlands frequently stand out in the documentary record as places of eel fishing in late summer and early autumn. Eel fishing brought together large groups of Wurundjeri and other clans, when they also carried out cultural or family business.

A natural eel trap formed in the wetlands as they receded and filled. The reeds over the wetland were lit to attract eels to the surface and caught with a spear. The wetlands of the Plenty River and Yan Yean were likely to have been networked with other fishing and hunting grounds.

Bear's Castle

Bear's Castle, built circa 1846, is a reminder of the contact era association between Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung and early settler families and their economic and domestic ties. There has been some past speculation that the architectural design of this shepherd's hut served as turrets for a defensive position from which to fire ammunition. From historical review, it is considered unlikely that conflict between Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people and colonists originated from Bear's Castle.



Bear's Castle at Yan Yean Reservoir catchment

'Yan Yean' in Woi-wurrung language

Yan Yean (and its variation of Yan-Yan) is a word meaning 'young unmarried male'. Robert Hoddle, surveyor general of the Port Phillip District between 1837 to 1853, had surveyed and named the Parish of Yan Yean by 1841. In doing so, he was instructed to name parishes using Indigenous language. The 19th century Melbourne commentator, Edmund 'Garryowen' Finn, writing in 1888, hypothesised that Yan Yean was an initiation area due to the naming attribution by Hoddle, however this is unconfirmed.



Cultural burn at Yan Yean Reservoir by the Narrap Rangers

Narrap-managed areas of remnant vegetation

Wurundjeri people continue to carry out their caring for Country responsibilities at Yan Yean via the Narrap Rangers who have conducted cultural burns and woody weed removal in the catchment. These activities provide additional meaning and value as community reconnect with their ancestral homelands and land management responsibilities.

Ongoing Narrap-led natural resources management will improve immediate ecological threats, seek to rehabilitate the Yan Yean catchment landscape, and importantly allow the Rangers to rebuild knowledge to restore and maintain healthy Country.



Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Corporation's Narrap Rangers

Recommendations

The Cultural Values Assessment documented the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people's use and occupancy of the Yan Yean Reservoir catchment and described the cultural significance of this landscape. The Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Corporation has developed a set of recommendations to appropriately protect and manage the cultural attributes and promote cultural values.

Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people aspire to preserve not just their archaeological footprint, but also intangible heritage and landscapes of cultural significance.

It is anticipated that these recommendations may be implemented using a range of mechanisms, including:

- the development and implementation of the Yan Yean master plan
- the ongoing partnership between Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Corporation and Melbourne Water which will focus initially on strengthening cultural heritage management practices and increasing the role of the Narrap Unit and cultural knowledge in caring for Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Corporation Country.

The recommendations are a starting point, based on current knowledge, which will be explored further in partnership with Melbourne Water. Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Corporation and Melbourne Water will collaborate to ensure recommendations are implemented in a way that preserves and protects cultural values, and ensures drinking water supply requirements are met.

Cultural heritage management and protection

Establish a mutually-agreed framework for assessing, protecting and managing Aboriginal cultural heritage at Yan Yean, including through further assessments, and avenues such as cultural inductions and an Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Land Management Agreement.

Caring for Country

Recognise the responsibility of Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people to care for Country by supporting the capacity and diversity of Narrap Ranger service delivery, improving ecological diversity and supporting cultural practice within the catchment. Ensure potential impacts on culturally significant species is considered in master plan development.

Partnering in development of the Yan Yean master plan

Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung aspirations and directions will guide master plan development and implementation.



Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Corporation and Melbourne Water team members at Yan Yean Reservoir Catchment

Promoting Wurundjeri cultural values

Development of a consistent interpretation strategy will enhance public knowledge of the cultural importance and sensitivity of the Yan Yean landscape. In the short term, this may be achieved by upgrading the existing signage and adding new interpretive elements to reflect Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung history and cultural practice at Yan Yean, past, present and future.

Protect the aesthetic and natural attributes of the landscape

The Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Corporation would like the public to continue to enjoy Yan Yean Reservoir Park; however, there is a continual need to work with Melbourne Water and other Yan Yean land managers to ensure that any new recreational opportunities and infrastructure do not damage the cultural values or natural attributes of their ancestral place.

Ngoon Godgin Thank you

Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Corporation and Melbourne Water would like to thank the following people and organisations for their contribution and support for the Cultural Values Assessment of Yan Yean Reservoir catchment:

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