

Traditional Owner joint management of environmental flows for the Coliban River

Luke Wilson¹ and Harley McCauley²

¹ DJANDAK, Bendigo, Vic, 3550. Email: luke.wilson@djadjawurrung.com.au

² North Central Catchment Management Authority, Bendigo, Vic, 3551. Email: Harley.mccauley@nccma.vic.gov.au

Key points

- Dja Dja Wurrung and the North Central Catchment Management Authority (CMA) have entered joint management arrangements for the planning and delivery of environmental water for the Coliban River,
- There have been positive outcomes for the Coliban River and Traditional Owners and a collaboration extending to key stakeholder groups and major landholders,
- Expansion of arrangements for joint management across additional waterways on Djandak will be considered as a further progression of the partnership between DJANDAK and North Central CMA.

Abstract

DJANDAK (an enterprise of the Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation), working on behalf of Djaara people is now piloting joint management of environmental water in the Coliban river system in central Victoria with waterway managers North Central Catchment Management Authority (CMA). This innovative approach has been formalised through a joint management agreement between the two organisations to jointly develop and deliver the seasonal watering proposal for the Coliban river for the 2026/27 water year.

Typically, Traditional Owners in Victoria are engaged as stakeholders, consulted on decisions made for environmental flows. This joint management approach has shifted the dial, moving Djaara into a collaborator role, empowered with a joint role for final endorsement of the 2026/27 seasonal watering proposal.

Joint management of environmental watering decisions for the Coliban river, which runs entirely on Djaara Country, has allowed traditional knowledge and practice to be incorporated as key considerations, alongside the ecological science to develop a robust understanding of the waterway and how best to support its values through the delivery of environmental water.

Joint management is delivering on Djaara strategic objectives to 'make decisions for Gatjin (water)' and 'manage environmental water' and the State Government's Water is Life policy for 'Traditional Owners have increased role in determining how environmental water is used for the purpose of healing Country'.

Building on the successes and learnings of the trial this joint management approach will be looked to be built upon for the development of 2027/28 seasonal water proposals, aiming to expand the model across more of the waterways on Djaara Country.

Keywords

Traditional Owners, shared governance, environmental flows, self-determination, collaboration, innovation

Introduction

DJANDAK (An enterprise of the Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation (trading as DJAARA)) and North Central CMA have established a formal Joint Management agreement for the planning and delivery of environmental water in the Coliban River.

Responsibility for the management of environmental water sits with North Central CMA as legislated in the Victorian Water Act. Obligations to care for the Coliban River and maintain healthy water for the people, plants and animals that rely on it sits with Djaara (Dja Dja Wurrung People) – a age old cultural responsibility.

The Joint management arrangements have been designed to deliver on the legislative responsibilities of North Central CMA and the Cultural responsibilities of Djaara. The Joint management sees the integration of cultural values and outcomes alongside environmental objectives to deliver a holistic environmental water flows regime for the Coliban River. Together we can harness the deep cultural knowledge of Dja Dja Wurrung alongside with the ecological insights of modern science to maintain the values of the waterway that Traditional Owners and the broader communities rely upon.

A formal obligation leading to an innovative approach

DJAARA is the Registered Aboriginal Party (RAP) across a large portion of central Victoria, covering much of the historic Victorian goldfields. DJAARA achieved a major milestone in 2013 when it entered into a Recognition and Settlement Agreement (RSA) with the State of Victoria. The agreement is available on the First Peoples - State Relations website (2025). The RSA sets an obligation on the State and its agencies to include DJAARA on behalf of Djaara (Dja Dja Wurrung people) in its natural resource management responsibilities and functions.

Enabled by the RSA, DJANDAK, the enterprise arm of DJAARA has developed a strong working relationship with the managers of water and waterways on Djandak (Dja Dja Wurrung Country) including with North Central CMA. There is a natural alignment with the interests and ambitions of both our organisations and a strong desire to work together for the benefit of waterways. This relationship has been building over the past ten years and has now reached a point of maturity that has allowed joint management to become a realistic option to formalise our collaboration around identified waterway management functions.

This approach is supported by the Victorian State Government - the Water is Life policy and roadmap that was released in 2022 charts a path to Traditional Owners in Victoria taking on greater responsibility and a self-determined role in managing different aspects of water (DEECA, 2022). Among other areas, Djaara has a significant interest and bold ambitions for environmental water and will pursue joint management to achieve these.

Current framework for environmental water planning and delivery in Victoria

Environmental water is governed by multiple agencies across Victoria through the following roles:

- Department of Energy Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) sets the policy for environmental water and administers funding for environmental water programs,
- Victorian Environmental Water Holder (VEWH) is a statutory body accountable for managing Victoria's environmental water entitlements including preparing the statewide annual Seasonal Watering Plan and authorising waterway managers to carry out watering actions;
- North Central CMA is the statutory waterway manager for the region and is responsible for managing the environmental water program for the region's rivers and wetlands. This includes preparing annual Seasonal Watering Proposals in consultation with stakeholders, securing environmental water allocations and delivering and monitoring the outcomes. It also involves longer-term strategic planning for instance through Environmental Water Management Plans (EWMPs) that sets ecological objectives and watering regimes for wetlands and waterways.

- Water Authorities with responsibility for water storage and delivery infrastructure action the delivery of water as per approved actions in the Seasonal Watering Plan and through direction from North Central CMA,
- Operational Advisory Groups, a group of experts and water and land managers that oversee the water deliveries,
- Environmental Water Advisory Group, a group of interested stakeholders and community members providing feedback on and informed of environmental water deliveries,
- Traditional Owner groups are typically engaged to contribute perspectives and objectives with the intent of the environmental water deliveries generating shared benefits – benefits beyond environmental.

Through joint management Djaara is able to be involved in many of these processes, collaborating from planning through the delivery.

The joint management model

Joint management was first conceptualized through the partnership group that has been established and convened by DJANDAK to deliver on Djaara's strategy for water – Dhelkunyangu Gatjin (working together to heal water) (DJAARA, 2023). The partnership group is made up of water agencies that have responsibility for water on Djandak and is called *Wanggal* - A Dja Dja Wurrung word, *Wanggal* means a cluster of cumbungi and symbolises all water agencies and Djaara working together to maintain health of water and waterways.

Wanggal has enabled all agencies responsible for environmental water and Djaara to convene in the one forum. This includes the VEWH, DEECA, North Central CMA and Djaara. Additionally, Coliban Water is the responsible agency for the release of environmental flows to the Coliban River.

Following the collaboration to establish the joint management arrangements – a formal voluntary agreement has been entered into between DJAARA and North Central CMA committing to work together on the planning and delivery of environmental water for the 2026/27 season. A governance structure and joint staffing arrangements have been formalised with DJANDAKA and North Central CMA staff working collaboratively on the planning, monitoring, stakeholder engagement and delivery of the environmental flows.

Real outcomes for the Coliban River and Traditional Owners

The joint management so far has been a success with the following outcomes already achieved:

- **Joint development and endorsement of the 2026/27 Coliban River Seasonal Watering Proposal:** for the SWP has been presented to both the DJAARA and North Central CMA Boards gaining endorsement through their respective governance frameworks. Submission of the 2026/27 SWP to the VEWH includes the joint endorsement cover page
- **Djaara themed SWP for the Coliban:** The presentation of the seasonal water plan for the Coliban River through the statewide plan includes a chapter for the Coliban River with bespoke branding and artwork completed by Djaara members. This makes the Coliban River standout with the input of Djaara being front and centre and an essential component of the plan.
- **A focus on landholder and stakeholder engagement:** Multiple major landholders with property that fronts the Coliban River were positively engaged in the joint SWP process. These relationships are critical as there are many parts of the Coliban River and its tributaries that are only accessible by private property. Two-way knowledge sharing events have been held with key local stakeholder groups, incorporating local knowledge in the conversation and a sense of shared ownership of the environmental flows process across the community,
- **Establishment of a Djaara member expert focus group:** This is a dedicated group of Djaara members focusing and advising on environmental flows. The look to apply cultural values and Djaara principles for managing Country and waterways to the management of environmental water management. A comprehensive Djaara Cultural Values Assessment for the Coliban River

is being undertaken to further articulate cultural values and traditional uses of the Coliban River,

- **Capability building for Traditional Owners:** Djaara is building capability in the management of environmental water which is enabling a greater role for Djaara. This role will continue to grow and develop overtime,
- **Unlocking additional water holdings:** The CEWH hold ~30ML of water in the Coliban system. This water has never been delivered as an environmental flow for the Coliban river due to costs to deliver the water outweighing benefits. Through joint management the case for delivery of the water is being reassessed.

A model for expansion

In addition to the Coliban River there are 6 other waterways on Djandak that NC CMA conduct environmental water planning and delivery for. Learnings from the joint management of Coliban River will be looked to as we aim to expand a model for all waterways systems on Djandak that enables Djaara cultural values and governance to be built into planning and delivery of environmental water.

To enable joint management across each of the waterways the following challenges have been identified and will be taken into account as arrangements for each of the systems is considered:

- **Flow across multiple Traditional Owner Traditional Owner boundaries:** Both the Loddon River and Campaspe River start on Djandak and flow through other Nations Boundaries. This needs consideration on how cultural values and objectives of each Traditional Owner groups is incorporated into environmental flow regimes, as well as governance processes and resources to support different groups,
- **Funding and resourcing:** Jointly managing environmental water planning and delivery across DJANDAK and North Central CMA requires staff resources from both organisations and funding to maintain the Djaara member expert focus group,
- **Legislative responsibilities:** While management of environmental water is shared through joint management, legislative responsibilities outlined in the Victorian Water Act do not reflect this. Under Water is Life (2022), DEECA is committed to state legislative reform where necessary to enable greater responsibility and decision making for Traditional Owners.

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