

# Georges Riverkeeper Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team: a model for successful engagement of Aboriginal communities in natural resource management of urban areas

Wales AC<sup>1</sup> and Cavanagh V<sup>2</sup>

1. *Georges Riverkeeper, 24 MacMahon Street, Hurstville NSW 2220, Email: [awales@georgesriver.nsw.gov.au](mailto:awales@georgesriver.nsw.gov.au)*

2. *School of Geography & Sustainable Communities, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Wollongong NSW 2522 Australia Email: [Vanessa@uow.edu.au](mailto:Vanessa@uow.edu.au)*

## Key Points

- The integration of Traditional Ecological Knowledge and involvement of Aboriginal communities in Natural Resource Management programs in urban areas is less developed than similar projects in regional and remote locations of Australia.
- In the Georges River catchment of southern Sydney, the Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team proved that Aboriginal engagement in Natural Resource Management can be successful in an urban region. With that success underpinned by a thoughtful and respectful Aboriginal engagement model.
- The Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team facilitated a mutual exchange of knowledge and experiences between local councils and Aboriginal organisations and individuals.

## Abstract

There are a variety of barriers to involving Aboriginal communities in Natural Resource Management in urban regions, including: greater numbers of stakeholders with competing demands; insufficient and/or inappropriate communication with Aboriginal groups; and the accessibility of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) in urban areas. From 2014 to 2017, an Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team was active in the Georges River catchment of southern Sydney, providing formal conservation land management qualifications and TEK training for participants, while delivering significant on-ground outcomes. The Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team was a success due to an Aboriginal engagement model which included a wide range of Aboriginal stakeholders, community engagement from conception to completion, shared goals, valuing of Aboriginal culture, prioritisation of Aboriginal participation and the empowerment of Aboriginal leadership. In this paper, we reflect on the foundation activities and engagement which led to the Local Aboriginal Land Councils of southern Sydney championing the Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team as a model for local government Aboriginal engagement in urban areas. While the engagement process's long term goal was Aboriginal self-determination, the overall engagement process became a two way exchange and learning experience for both the local councils and Aboriginal organisations and individuals.

## Keywords

Aboriginal Engagement, Local Government, Riverkeeper, Local Aboriginal Land Councils

## Introduction

Research indicates that the scope and scale of Indigenous peoples involvement in formal caring for Country projects have increased over recent decades (Hill et al. 2013, State of the Environment Committee 2011). There are many examples of cross-cultural caring for Country projects in Australia (Hill et al. 2013); however, the majority of these occur in the continent's regional and remote locations and few are located in urban centres (Pert et al. 2015, Hill et al. 2013). As a successful urban case study, this paper presents the cross-cultural engagement that occurred during the Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team (ART) project in Sydney, NSW. This paper is written from the perspective of the project's lead agency, a non-Indigenous entity called the Georges Riverkeeper (formerly Georges River Combined Councils' Committee or GRCCC). To provide an Aboriginal

perspective, this paper is co-authored by the Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team (ART) project manager, who is an Aboriginal woman, and includes quotes from the Aboriginal partners in the project, these quotes were all drawn from a report (EcoLogical Australia 2017) prepared at the completion of the ART project that examined the success of the project's Aboriginal engagement. First, an overview of the case study location and the ART project is provided before exploring the challenges and approaches regarding the engagement with the Aboriginal community experienced during the project. Finally, the paper concludes with recommendations that will be useful to existing projects as well as providing insight to future projects.

The paper makes use of Aboriginal English where 'Country' aligns to Rose's (1996) definition. The words 'Aboriginal' and 'Indigenous' are capitalised to reflect their status as proper nouns and to respect the heritage of the racial groups that these words relate to (similar to capitalisation for other heritage's such as *Italian*, *Japanese*, etc). Additionally, the term Indigenous Australians to refer inclusively to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and the term Aboriginal to refer to the First Australians from the mainland. As this case study is relevant to the George River catchment area in south-western Sydney the term of preference is Aboriginal, but some local cultural groups are referred to by their cultural names (e.g. Dharawal people).

### **The Georges River Catchment**

The Georges River catchment is 960 km<sup>2</sup>, and is home to over 1 million people, making it one of Australia's most highly urbanised catchments ([www.georgesriver.org.au/](http://www.georgesriver.org.au/)). The Georges River catchment stretches from Botany Bay on the east coast of NSW west towards Prospect Reservoir and south into bushland around Campbelltown and Appin. The lower and western parts of the Georges River catchment are dominated by the expanses of Sydney's southern and south-western urban sprawl, with natural areas and national parks taking up much of the upper catchment. The impacts from the large and growing human population in the catchment include habitat loss through urban encroachment, stormwater management issues and erosion, invasion by pest animals and weeds, litter and pollution. The catchment encompasses 41 ecological communities, including many endangered ecological communities as well as threatened fauna species ([www.georgesriver.org.au/](http://www.georgesriver.org.au/)).

The catchment intersects the lands of several Aboriginal nations including: the Eora, Gandangarra, Dharawal/Tharawal, and Darug peoples. However, in contemporary times due to migration, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from other nations across the continent now reside in the catchment. The catchment includes lands within the boundaries of five Local Aboriginal Lands Councils (LALC): Metropolitan, La Perouse, Tharawal, Gandangarra and Deerubbin.

### **Outline of the Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team Project**

There are two parallel mechanisms that comprise the ART project: one being the team itself, the other being the project partners that provided the structural and governance support for the project. Each mechanism will now be briefly described, followed by issues relating to successful engagement.

The ART project operated within the Georges River catchment between July 2014 and June 2017. The project employed an Aboriginal project manager (co-author of this paper, VC), and a non-Indigenous team supervisor to lead a small, full-time team of Aboriginal trainees to undertake Conservation and Land Management traineeships. During the three years, the team worked across 17 locations in the catchment, primarily undertaking bush regeneration and participating in ecological restoration works. The trainees gained formal qualifications through a Registered Training Organisation. All eight trainees gained qualifications in Certificate II Conservation and Land Management (CLM), and four of these trainees additionally completed Certificate III Indigenous Land Management (ILM). In addition to the formal qualifications, the project incorporated strong Aboriginal cultural components and education. This was facilitated through 'cultural days' with specific engagement with Aboriginal Elders, knowledge holders and Local Aboriginal Land Councils within the catchment to undertake contemporary and TEK training. The purpose of the project was to acknowledge the continuity of Aboriginal culture, community and Country within the urban landscape of Sydney.

The project required involvement from numerous partners who each held crucial structural and governance roles. Through this process the project fostered partnerships between government, the private sector, the Aboriginal community through the LALCs, a registered training organisation (RTO), and Georges

Riverkeeper, a regional grouping of local government within the Georges River catchment. Through Georges Riverkeeper, the project involved local government, specifically: Campbelltown City Council, Liverpool City Council, Fairfield City Council, City of Canterbury Bankstown (formerly Bankstown City Council), Georges River Council (formerly Hurstville City Council and Kogarah City Council), Bayside Council (formerly Rockdale City Council) and Sutherland Shire Council. At the state government level, Greater Sydney Local Land Services were involved. The project engaged directly with the Metropolitan LALC, La Perouse LALC, Gandangara LALC and Tharawal LALC. Consultants Eco Logical Australia (ELA) employed and managed the team and delivered the ART portion of the grant funding. Northern Sydney Institute at Ryde (TAFE NSW) provided training for the formal qualifications. The coordination of these partners was operationalised through two steering committees, one being an Aboriginal steering committee, and the other being the project steering committee.

### **A model for Aboriginal engagement in urban NRM**

In August 2013, the Georges Riverkeeper received funding from the Australian Government for a project titled '*Building Indigenous knowledge and skills to improve urban waterways*'. A portion of the funding was committed to the ART project and sought to engage with Aboriginal communities to further develop the ART project concept. It was decided that Georges Riverkeeper would work with the LALCs within the catchment and, where possible, engage Aboriginal people and organisations to manage on ground works involving the ART.

The engagement process that took place between Georges Riverkeeper and the Aboriginal communities faced a variety of challenges including, but not limited to: greater numbers of stakeholders with competing demands; insufficient and/or inappropriate communication with Aboriginal groups; and the accessibility of TEK in urban areas. The Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team was a success due to an Aboriginal engagement model which included a wide range of Aboriginal stakeholders, community engagement from conception to completion, shared goals, the valuing of Aboriginal culture, a prioritisation of Aboriginal participation and the empowerment of Aboriginal leadership.

Aboriginal engagement at Local Government level in the urban areas of NSW has a checkered history rife with pitfalls, a history of which the project team was aware and set out to avoid. From the beginning Georges Riverkeeper's objective was to engage the Aboriginal community of the Georges River catchment in an inclusive manner that acknowledged the river's continuity of Aboriginal culture, community and Country. Aboriginal Elders were involved in the development of the grant submission providing guidance on the appropriate submission content and engagement with the Aboriginal community. From the Local Government perspective, while not all of the ideals were achieved the majority were and the project proved a success. From the Aboriginal community's perspective the project provided a valuable opportunity to create training and employment for Aboriginal people, while also highlighting the Aboriginal heritage values present in the catchment, and managing for the protection of this heritage at the locations where the ART completed on-ground-works.

The project is of note nationally as it was a success in an urban area while other Indigenous Ranger Programs involved in Caring for Country occur in remote and regional areas where appropriate project partners, Elders and spokesperson(s) for areas of Country may be more easily identified.

At the end of the project in 2017, all parties would have liked to continue the ART but it was realised that the financial support was not available to do so and as a consequence the Georges Riverkeeper project team ensured there was a viable legacy of the project by preparing the *Aboriginal Engagement Case Study – Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team Project* (Eco Logical Australia , 2017).

### **Barriers to Engagement**

Many barriers exist to successful engagement between the Aboriginal community and non-Indigenous organisations. Organisations involved in the engagement process need to acknowledge each other's strengths, weaknesses, cultural differences and priorities and to find the "happy" blend for all concerned and that is not without compromise on all sides.

Local Government organisations are concerned when working with Local Aboriginal Land Councils about stability of LALC management and continuity of LALC staff. During the duration of the project there were a

number of LALC Board and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) changes within LALCs plus staff changes which put the LALC's involvement in the project back to the beginning. Organisational priorities would often change with the management turnover, resulting in the project that was once championed and given priority status within the LALC being moved off their agenda.

Local government is also concerned with identifying the appropriate individuals and organisations with the authority to speak on behalf of the local Aboriginal people. In urban areas, this is complicated by the assorted diaspora of outback and regional Aboriginal people migrating to those areas. With this project a decision was made early to engage with the LALCs as the LALCs represent the interest of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within their geographic boundaries.

The changes in priorities within LALCs need to be acknowledged by Local Government when they occur because, like many organisations, LALC resources are limited and will be directed to the areas of greatest concern and best return for the community. While Country and its Spiritual connections are important to all Aboriginal people, the LALCs need to deal with the health, welfare and housing of the community as top priorities and from time to time need to move a majority of resources to address these issues.

At all times Local Government organisations need to keep in the forefront of their thinking that the Aboriginal community have a different set of values from the traditional western view of values – Local Government and their staff need to value Aboriginal culture. To the Aboriginal community connections to Country are seen as environmental, spiritual, social, political and language-related and are all rolled in to one while the western view has each compartmentalised to be dealt with individually. The bottom line for Aboriginal people is their desire for self-determination as this was specified by the Federal Government as a long-term goal to “achieve Aboriginal Community capacity to protect biodiversity in urban areas” as an integral component of the projects Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement (MERI) plan.

*‘Local councils and any organisation that approach a Land Council need to be culturally appropriate, they need to understand Aboriginal culture, and make sure their staff do too.’* Brad Maybury, Cultural Heritage Officer, Gandangara Local Aboriginal Land Council

*‘The LGA need to trust our teachings and our ways and need to go along with Aboriginal cultural lessons. They need to not just do the white teachings but there needs to be balance so they need to get on board and accept Aboriginal teachings and practices. For this to happen they need to trust the Aboriginal way of doing it rather than dismiss it.’* Dave Ingrey, Aboriginal community member, La Perouse Aboriginal Land Council

It is also important to remember when working with the Aboriginal community that there are high levels of mistrust for government and government organisations. This is especially evident among the older generations who were personally, or just one generation away from connections to the Stolen Generations; and also those who have vivid memories of prior to 1967 when Aboriginal people were not counted within the Federal Government census and when later, under the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974, Aboriginal Heritage and landscapes were administered by the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

*‘It (the project) has a specific task to focus on which was to look after the Georges River. It also worked because it was independent and wasn't connected to any one specific person or organisation; it wasn't Land Councils, and it wasn't the local councils, it was separate, which meant that there was no political influence in the project and it was able to run its course without interference.’* Dave Ingrey, Aboriginal community member, La Perouse Aboriginal Land Council

Local Government staff who are finding internal resistance or are confronted with a lack of understanding from fellow staff should remember that they have their Council policies regarding Aboriginal engagement and Council's Aboriginal Advisory Committees may be of assistance. On the other hand, Aboriginal individuals and organisations need to understand the processes of Government, many of which are rigid and inflexible for

reasons of probity and public transparency. Local government procurement processes are governed by a strict set of guidelines and rules by which submissions and tenders are assessed.

Processes of decision-making at Local Government are not necessarily quick, as the process of consideration and approval often has to follow internal processes and formal meetings at which consensus must be obtained before actions can move forward or greater clarification requested. Again probity and public transparency are an issue.

At the end of the engagement process a resolution was developed that *'the project would uphold and promote Aboriginal values and worldviews in its operation as an Aboriginal focused caring for Country activity'*.

### **The Project's Engagement Process**

The Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team project was modelled on the following principles of Aboriginal engagement:

- Include a wide range of stakeholders
- Engage with the community from the concept phase of the project
- Have a goal that is shared by stakeholders
- Value Aboriginal culture
- Prioritise Aboriginal participation
- Empower Aboriginal leadership

*'The Aboriginal Riverkeeper project worked well because it included everyone ... how can you go wrong when the project is designed to be inclusive and involve everyone from the start?'* Brad Maybury, Cultural Heritage Officer, Gandangara Local Aboriginal Land Council

In the early stages of the project the Project Structure was developed showing the hierarchy of bodies and their interrelationships (Figure 1).

At the commencement of the project two formal steering committees were established to oversee governance of the project.

The Project Steering Committee was charged with:

- Providing direction essential for the delivery of project outputs and the attainment of project outcomes;
- Ensuring appropriate management of the project components outlined in the Project MERI Plan, including risk monitoring, quality and timeliness;
- Ensure project scope and outcomes match those of stakeholders;
- Monitor monetary and resources expenditure;
- Providing any and all reasonable assistance to the Project Manager (such as in-kind help from council staff);
- Reconcile differences in opinion and approach and resolve disputes; and
- Reporting to the appropriate government bodies on any relevant issue.

The Project Steering Committee met twice per year or as required to deal with immediate issues. The representatives from Georges Riverkeeper and the Greater Sydney Local Land Services were nonvoting.

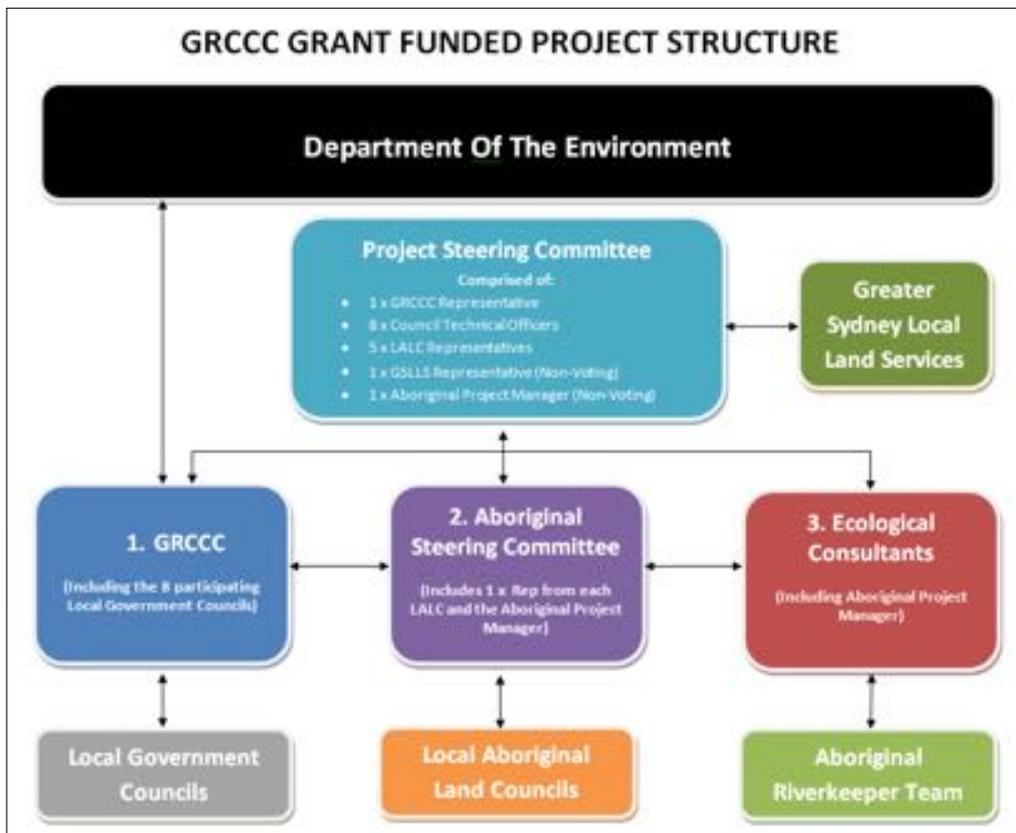
The second steering committee was the Aboriginal Steering Committee charged with:

- Arranging appropriate participant training with Elders and knowledge holders
- Overseeing participant welfare

The Aboriginal Steering Committee voting members were comprised of:

- A representative from each participating LALC
- Aboriginal Project Manager (Aboriginal person engaged by Ecological Consultants)

Figure 1: Project Structure Diagram



It was intended that the ecological consultants engaged to deliver the Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team component of the grant would be Aboriginal owned and managed. However, after no compliant submissions were received from Aboriginal organisations in the first round, the criteria was opened in a second round to all ecological consultancies (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal owned) which again bore no compliant submission from any Aboriginal owned entity. Therefore the Georges Riverkeeper engaged Eco Logical Australia (ELA) which proposed to engage a suitably qualified Aboriginal person to manage the team. The Aboriginal project manager engaged by ELA became a significant player in providing an understanding of some of the complexities the cross-cultural collaboration experienced and in guiding the relationships between the Georges Riverkeeper and its member Councils with the LALCs.

Once the formalities of the engagement process were settled, a number of key points emerged that made the engagement process more organic:

- The involvement of multiple LALCs was an advantage because when a lead LALC at the beginning of the project went in to administration other LALCs filled the gap created by the void. This process was repeated throughout the project as for one reason one or another LALCs were less able to commit to the project.

- Finding your champions, either within the LALCs or individuals – or better still, a combination of both.
- As outlined earlier, it was necessary to be understanding of the issues that did arise which may impact on an LALC's ability to commit at a particular period of time. We worked with them and kept the door open for their return.
- The need to be flexible where possible – when we failed to meet quorums for the Aboriginal Steering Committee it was not because of disinterest, rather it was because the LALCs had confidence in the project and the role of the Aboriginal project manager and the Georges Riverkeeper to maintain the objectives of the Aboriginal community. Trust is valuable.
- The engagement of the Aboriginal project manager ensured that the doors of the LALCs remained open and it was rare that communications broke down and only happened in the most extreme of circumstances.

*'I would attribute a great deal of the success down to the great collaboration of Local Government with Local Aboriginal Land Councils and engagement of the expertise of Eco Logical Australia to establish the Aboriginal Riverkeeper project to address a common theme to all parties, the health of the Georges River. The project has allowed us the ability to protect & preserve a valuable community resource such as the Georges River and through the project provide training, education and employment of Aboriginal people. A great success on many levels.'* Nathan Moran, CEO, Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council

## **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

There are numerous useful lessons and take away messages that can be drawn from the ART project. These recommendations are intended to be useful to existing cross-cultural collaborative projects, as well as providing insight for planning for future projects. Of course, these recommendations are guidelines rather than rules, and each project will need to respond to local features and factors affecting the Indigenous community.

1. **Be Inclusive:** Include a wide range of stakeholders. If you can engaged more than one Aboriginal community or group in your project then do so, but make sure that they are comfortable to do so and that they respect the right of that organisation or person to be a spokesperson for the Aboriginal Community
2. **Engage Early:** Engage with the Aboriginal Community from the concept stage of the project. Ensure the community has ownership of the project as a component of self-determination and a role in managing Country.
3. **Share the Goal:** Have a goal that is shared by stakeholders. Realise each party's aspirations and goals and find common ground. Both parties share a common concern and it's often just a matter of finding the right rhetoric rather than objectives.
4. **Value Aboriginal Culture:** Acknowledging the Aboriginal beliefs and values and embrace them. Align with core Aboriginal values and nurture Culture, Spirit and Country for the Community and the individual.
5. **Prioritise Aboriginal Participation:** Get this right and the on-ground delivery of your project will work. Aim to have Aboriginal participants at every level. You may have difficulty finding an Aboriginal person with the right skill sets and if you have to engage a non-indigenous person in a role make sure representatives of the Aboriginal Community are part of the decision and engagement process. Having an Aboriginal person in the Aboriginal Manager Role was key to the success of our entire project.
6. **Empower Aboriginal Leadership:** Local Government organisations tend to have strong corporate support and such resources should be made available to your Aboriginal project leaders (e.g. Project

Manager and Team Supervisor). Our project service provider, Eco logical Australia took this one step further and provided lifestyle leadership and support for the project participants.

## Acknowledgments

We acknowledge and pay respects to the Elders and ancestors on whose lands the Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team project took place. We would like to thank all the trainees and team members who have been associated with the Georges River Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team. We acknowledge and thank the Australian Government; Eco Logical Australia Pty Ltd; the Georges Riverkeeper and each of its member councils; the four partner Local Aboriginal Land Councils: Metropolitan LALC, La Perouse LALC, Gandangarra LALC, and Tharawal LALC; and The Northern Sydney Institute (TAFE NSW). We thank the Aboriginal Elders, knowledge holders and communities who have contributed towards the outcomes that the ART have experienced, the trainees always stated that the cultural days that they shared with you were the absolute best!

## References

- Eco Logical Australia 2017. Aboriginal Engagement Case Study - Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team Project. Prepared for George River Combined Councils Committee Inc. (GRCCC) Accessed online 2/5/2018 at <http://www.georgesriver.org.au/IgnitionSuite/uploads/docs/Riverkeeper%20Aboriginal%20Engagement%20Case%20Study%20-%20Aboriginal%20Riverkeeper%20Team%20Project.pdf>
- Georges River Combined Councils Committee *Natural Environment* Accessed online 2/5/2018 at <http://www.georgesriver.org.au/Natural-Environment.html>
- Georges River Combined Councils Committee *Your Georges River* Accessed online 2/5/2018 at <http://www.georgesriver.org.au/Your-Georges-River.html>
- Hill, R., P.L. Pert, J. Davies, C.J. Robinson, F. Walsh, and F. Falco-Mammone (2013) Indigenous Land Management in Australia: Extent, scope, diversity, barriers and success factors. Cairns: CSIRO Ecosystem Sciences.
- Pert, P., E.J. Ens, J. Locke, P.A. Clarke, J.M. Packer, G. Turpin (2015) An online spatial database of Australian Indigenous Biocultural Knowledge for contemporary natural and cultural resource management. *Science of the Total Environment* 534: 110-121.
- Rose, D. B. (1996). *Nourishing terrains: Australian Aboriginal views of landscape and wilderness*.
- State of the Environment 2011 Committee (2011) *Australia state of the environment 2011*, Independent report to the Australian Government Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities. Canberra: DSEWPac, 2011.