



Ringbalin shares Indigenous culture and healing environment message

By Michael Coggan

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On a sandy dance floor at the mouth of the Murray, warmed by a circle of fires, Aboriginal groups have staged a ringbalin, the culmination of a week of ceremonies along the Murray-Darling river system.

Ringbalin, a Ngarrindjeri word for ceremony, involves sharing stories of Indigenous culture and staging healing ceremonies for the waterways.

"It's about the spirit of this land, it's about the spirit of the river and the stories that we tell our children," Ngarrindjeri elder Major Sumner explained.

"[They are] stories that need to be passed on — about the river, about creation of the land that we live in."

About 30 Ngarrindjeri dancers and supporters were joined by the members of other Indigenous dance groups as they visited Brewarrina, Bourke, Mount Gundabooka, Wilcannia, Menindee, Mildura, Wentworth, Renmark and Murray Bridge.

Laurance Magick Dennis travelled to Goolwa in South Australia from Walgett in New South Wales with dance group Milan Dhiyaan.

He said that over half a century he had seen significant changes to the Barwon and Namoi rivers, close to Walgett.

"As a kid I used to be able to go down to the river and stick my head in and it was just like getting a fresh drink of water out of a rainwater tank, but now you wouldn't be game enough to do it — you'd end up with diarrhoea or something," he said.

Joseph Dixon, from the River Boys dance group from Bourke, told the Goolwa audience he was taking part in the ringbalin because he wanted it to build support for caring for the river system.

"Every single one of us is affected by what's been put in the river upstream," he said.

River system a trickle upstream

Despite some heavy rainfall boosting flows in recent months, Major Sumner said he was worried about how the river system was being managed in the longer term.

"At Wilcannia, you can jump across the river, you can just take one step and jump, you don't even need to run up," he said.

"These waterways are our lifeblood — we've got a word for all the animals, ngatji, [it] means friend [and] if we don't look after the water in the river our friends will die — when they die we die."

The ringbalin journey has given the wider community a chance to learn about Indigenous culture, Major Sumner said.

"They want to learn our stories, our dances, our creation stories, everything about this land that they don't know," he said.

He said the swan egg dance was a favourite of his, a performance based on stories passed down from elders about not taking all the eggs.

"That's something that we learnt, never to be greedy. We learn that ... our children learn that."

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