



Traditional owners call for water rights one year on from Barkindji native title determination

ABC Broken Hill By Sofie Wainwright

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It has been a year since the Barkindji people were granted the largest native title claim in New South Wales but some traditional owners say they need more rights to water.

The native title claim covers the state's far west, extending from Wentworth at the Victorian border to Wanaaring in the north-west of New South Wales.

It includes Broken Hill, Wilcannia, Menindee, Pooncarie and Dareton, as well as a 400-kilometre stretch of the Darling River.

The determination in June last year drew hundreds of people with Barkindji heritage to Broken Hill and recognised their uninterrupted connection with the land and water since prior to colonisation.

However, some Barkindji people said native title had less significance without water in the Darling River as they were unable to carry out traditional customs like fishing and using the water for cultural purposes.

'Government has taken our lifeblood' says owner

Barkindji man Badger Bates, from Broken Hill, said the health of the Darling River was deteriorating and he felt it has been forgotten.

"The native title means a lot to us, it means we have recognition of who we are on our country," Mr Bates said.

"It was about 12 months ago since we had the native title, but then in that 12 months, the government came along and we feel that they have given us our native title, but then they took our lifeblood, the river."

Many Indigenous people in far west New South Wales believe the drying up of the Darling River is due to an over allocation of water to upstream irrigators by authorities — which the State Government has denied.

Mr Bates said he would like to establish a treaty with the Government to give the Barkindji influence over the river system.

"We would like to see a cultural flow go through; that is our right, that we should have cultural flows," Mr Bates said.

Hunting and fishing central to culture

Brad Gittins, a Barkindji man who lives in Bendigo in Victoria, said the Darling River needed to be fixed.

"Native Title gives us rights to hunt and fish, but there will be no hunting and fishing if there's no water and that's central to our cultural heritage," Mr Gittins said.

"I think a better idea, better than native title, would be a treaty and each treaty should be specific to each tribe, each area, but also a blanket treaty similar to what the Maoris enjoy."

Fred Hooper is the chairman of the Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations group, which represents several Aboriginal groups including the Barkindji.

Mr Hooper said native title was not enough and the Government should establish a treaty giving Indigenous Australians rights to water allocations.

"I think Australia needs to look at our first nations' water rights; we were the first people who had water rights in this country," Mr Hooper said.

"What we consider as a cultural flow is water that we own, and we control, and we can send down the river when Aboriginal people require it.

"It's controlled by Aboriginal people and its controlled by the nations to get it to the areas we feel need it at the time even if its on top of an environmental flow.

"The environmental flow regime is not working within the Darling River, and we need to look at new ways of getting water down to those areas."

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