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When they take the water from a Barkandji person, they take our blood

I teach young Australians about Aboriginal culture and how they should respect the Barka, the Darling River. There's nothing to teach if there's no river, writes **Badger Bates for @IndigenousX**

William 'Badger' Bates is an artist, educator and elder of the Barkandji people

William 'Badger' Bates *for IndigenousX*

Wed 26 Jul 2017 15.46 AEST



I'm originally from Wilcannia. That's where I was reared up on the riverbank in a tin hut. And the Barka, the Darling River, it never ever went dry in my time. For me, a healthy river is my life. If we have a healthy river, everything flows. It means I can go out and teach young Australians, whether they're black or white, about Aboriginal culture, about how to survive in the bush and how they should respect the river.

I'll be 70 in October. When I was growing up, until I was in my thirties, the Barka never went dry. But after that, they started pumping it dry. For the last five to eight years, we say the Barka's buka. That means the Darling River's dead. It stinks of the dead fish. It's rotten.

About three years ago we got our native title rights. They recognised our rights to the land, but we had no rights over the water. To us, it was bad. From the middle of the Darling, around Wilcannia and Menindee, to see what the irrigators are doing up the top was really bad. Now the irrigators have proved that they can stop the river.

They talk about spending \$500m to put in a pipeline from the Murray to Broken Hill. That is a waste of time, because what they're doing is killing the Darling River. With that pipeline, they're going to put pressure on the Murray and they're going to kill the Murray too. I told the government people to stop being greedy and let the water go through for everyone. We are Barkandji people. We want to share that water with everyone. We're not irrigators. But some of the government people, they are more crooked than a boomerang. I don't think they would ever lay straight in bed.

I say as a Barkandji person, reared on the river all my life: we don't want a pipeline from the Murray. Our Natji, the rainbow serpent, doesn't live in a pipe. It's got to live in the water.

We say that the old turtle or the yabby can jump up and walk away. But the fish can't. There are a lot of other little animals that live in there too that keep the river healthy. They can't walk away. To us, that's our family. We have to protect them. If we don't protect Natji, then it hurts us.

In the last five years, our elders are giving up and dying. Then our young people are committing suicide and it's hurting, because of the river.

It affects crime rates around Wilcannia, Menindee and right to Burke and Walgett. There were reports done in 2010. When the river is up, the crime goes down. As soon as the river drops, the crime rate goes up. There's nothing for the kids to do.

It doesn't matter what colour you are, if you live up here in western New South Wales, you've got to learn about the river. You've got to fish and catch a yabby. You must prove that you're a bushman by catching a yabby on a little stick with a string and a piece of meat on it. But we can't do that anymore. How do we teach culture when we've got nothing to teach?

About five years ago, they had grapes in Menindee. The Wilcannia mob used to come down. Black people and white people from Broken Hill used to go down and they'd have work. Since the irrigators up there took the water, there is no work. The grapevines are dying and the fruit's dying. Now, there's nothing. And it seems to be that when they do all this, it's about cotton. We don't need a lot of cotton. We need our water.

When they take the water from a Barkandji person, they take our blood. They're killing us. It's not just us Barkandji people who are feeling it. It's the white people and other people too.

How can I teach culture when they're taking our beloved Barka away? There's nothing to teach if there's no river. The river is everything. It's my life, my culture. You take the water away from us; we've got nothing.

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