

GAYINI



Aboriginal people reconnecting to Country, and Country reconnecting to people

Gayini (Nimmie-Caira) project

Image: NSW Department of Planning and Environment.

Quick facts

Project type:
Sustainable land management – agriculture, water, environment, culture

Location:
Lower Murrumbidgee Valley

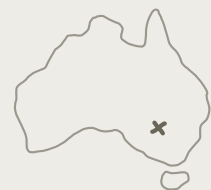
Aboriginal language landscape group:
Nari Nari

Client:
Nari Nari People

Project time frame:
Ongoing since 2013

Project scale:
Landscape scale:
87,816 hectares

Project team:
Nari Nari Tribal Council, The Nature Conservancy, Murray Darling Wetlands Working Group, Centre for Ecosystem Science, University of NSW



A vast area of inland floodplain in south-west NSW – nearly 88,000 hectares – is now a sustainably managed and financed conservation property owned by its Traditional Custodians, the Nari Nari Tribal Council. This has provided a unique opportunity for Nari Nari People to protect their lands and waters.

Key outcomes

Healthy Country

The project has returned a large amount of water back to the wetlands, restoring natural systems and removing threats. Since this renewal, the critically endangered plains-wanderer bird has been seen and photographed for the first time in Gayini.

Healthy community

Traditional Custodians have deep, ancient connections to the floodplain and its ecosystems. Gayini represents the cultural identity of the Nari Nari People, for whom returning to water Country strengthens their cultural identity.

Protecting Aboriginal cultural heritage

Nari Nari Tribal Council worked with the NSW Government to deliver water infrastructure and long-term land and water management plans, supporting Traditional Custodians in caring for their own waters.

Spatial implications / tips for designers

Always attempt to bring daylight to natural water that belongs above ground – noting there are conditions where artesian water should remain below ground.

Touch the ground lightly and minimise ground levelling and excavation. This will maintain site hydrology and allow water to flow with little interference.



Rene Woods, Gayini Project Manager, The Nature Conservancy Australia

Image: Annette Ruzicka.

Gayini (water) – a cultural landscape in the lower Murrumbidgee Valley – has been part of the homeland of the Nari Nari People for over 50,000 years. Through deep, ancient connections to the floodplain and its ecosystems that still exist, this highly productive landscape has supported the Nari Nari People through many seasons and varied climate events.

Gayini is part of the Lowbidgee Floodplain within the southern Murray–Darling Basin. As the largest remaining area of wetlands in the Murrumbidgee Valley, this is an area of national and international conservation significance.

The entire Gayini area is a rich cultural landscape. The property is home to a wealth of Indigenous cultural features, from resources, medicines, and sacred canoe scar trees to ancient burial mounds and camp sites.

For thousands of years the Nari Nari have made interventions to boost the productivity of their Country – enhancing fish and bird stocks and vegetation growth. Once more in their possession, Nari Nari People are now caring for their land using a combination of traditional and modern techniques to improve productivity and enhance its values.

As was the case in many areas of Australia, following European settlement the land was simply taken from Indigenous people and developed for agriculture. Channels and other infrastructure were formed across the region to harvest and distribute floodwaters from the rivers for crops and livestock. These processes have changed and altered Country, and in many cases the results have been negative.

Accumulating a vast landholding

In 2013, as part of the implementation of the Murray–Darling Basin Plan, the NSW and Australian governments purchased 19 separate properties and their water extraction rights in the Lower Murrumbidgee Valley. The conglomerated super property became known as ‘Nimmie-Caira’ (now referred to as ‘Gayini’ – the Nari Nari word for water).

During 2017, the NSW Government called on interested parties to submit proposals for the ongoing management of Gayini, now without its former water extraction rights. Those rights were transferred to the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder as part of water recovery targets set in the Murray–Darling Basin Plan.

In May 2018, a consortium led by The Nature Conservancy was announced as the successful proponent and took over management of Gayini. The other members of the consortium were the Nari Nari Tribal Council, the Murray Darling Wetlands Working Group and the Centre for Ecosystem Science, University of NSW.

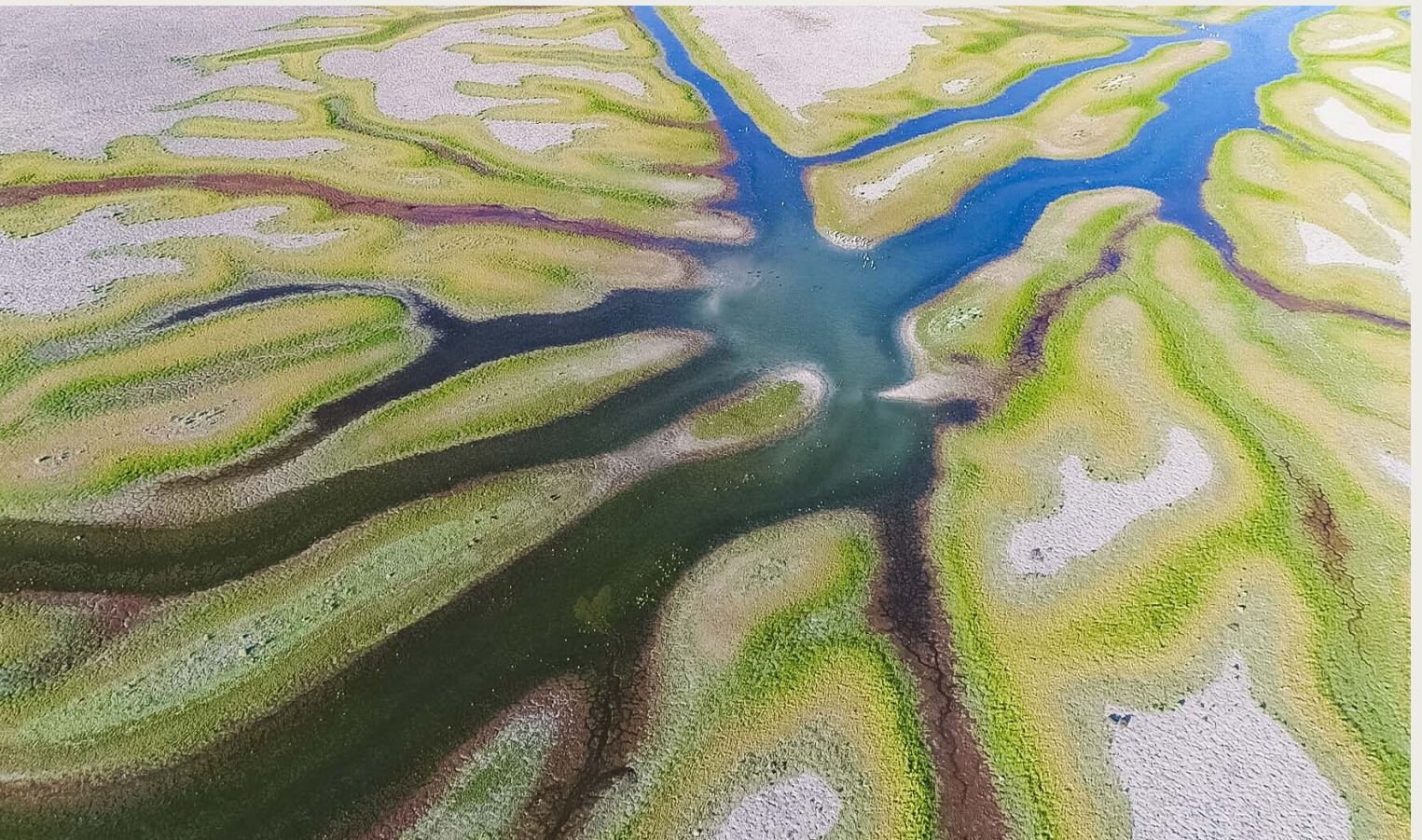
In late 2019, with funding from the Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation and the Wyss Campaign for Nature, The Nature Conservancy facilitated the legal transfer of ownership of Gayini to the Nari Nari Tribal Council. Back in Aboriginal ownership, and respecting the rights of its Traditional Custodians, the Country is now managed for the conservation of its precious wildlife, the development of sustainable agriculture, and the protection of the significant cultural heritage of the Nari Nari People for many generations to come.

The consortium partnership is beneficial to all participants in that it brings together expertise that ultimately benefits people, culture and Country.

Wetlands at Gayini, NSW

Image: Annette Ruzicka.





Aerial view: Eulimbah, Gayini

Image: Annette Ruzicka.

Protecting native wildlife

The cultural landscape is a refuge, particularly for Gayini's abundant numbers and various sizes of native Australian birds – from tiny spotted pardalotes to large numbers of big, impressive emus.

Of highest significance, the wetlands provide feeding and breeding habitat for many different species of freshwater regional and migratory birds which can amass in large nesting colonies when conditions are right – species like the straw-necked ibis, royal spoonbill, little pied cormorant and Australian pelican. Nationally listed threatened species are also protected at Gayini, including one of Australia's largest frogs – the southern bell frog – and 2 endangered bird species – the Australasian bittern and the Australian painted snipe. In November 2019, the critically endangered plains-wanderer was seen and photographed – a first for Gayini. This unique bird species relies on native grasslands that are well managed, with not too much grazing but not too little.

Balancing conservation with production

The project balances environmental and Aboriginal cultural heritage protection with commercial use, and by doing so creates an asset for the local community and the Murray–Darling Basin.

While around half of the property was previously used for cropping and grazing over the past 150 years, the majority remains covered with significant native vegetation in good or recovering condition. Gayini's management plan incorporates traditional Aboriginal knowledge to permanently protect these habitats for the wealth of species that rely on them for their survival.

After many decades of agricultural use, managing a property as vast as Gayini for conservation is an expensive business. To fund this work, the Nari Nari owners are demonstrating exemplary food production in balance with nature through responsible low-impact grazing and, when appropriate, opportunistic cropping.

Responsible low-impact grazing is likely to be the primary driver of income to maintain the property while it transitions over time to a more balanced nature-based and culture-based business model.

Restoring natural systems and removing feral animals

Since returning to manage this Country, the Nari Nari have assessed and maintained roads and infrastructure, protected cultural and heritage sites, and removed large numbers of feral pests. Importantly, they have also reinstated a more natural flooding regime across the property and laid almost 400 kilometres of pipes, delivering water to parts of the property where it is needed by livestock.

Feral animals (non-native, introduced animals) present a serious threat to both the conservation of native species (either through predation, competition for limited resources or destruction of habitat) and the ongoing productivity of agriculture on Gayini and neighbouring properties. In the second half of 2018 more than 2500 feral pests were removed, including almost 1500 pigs, more than 1000 deer and many foxes and cats.

Planning a series of steps

Bringing this project together involved 5 major components:

- Land and water purchase – the project purchased 19 properties on the Nimmie-Caira floodplain, together with their share of the Lowbidgee Supplementary Water Entitlement (381,000 shares).
- Water savings to 'bridge the gap' – water entitlements purchased from landholders were transferred to the Commonwealth to help 'bridge the gap' to meeting sustainable diversion limits.
- Environmental watering plan – this documents the demand for environmental water within and beyond the project area.
- Long-term land management and water management plan – this outlines how the area will be managed long term, with some land managed for Aboriginal cultural heritage and environmental values and other land managed for commercial use.
- Reconfiguring water delivery infrastructure – the delivery of environmental water to lands identified as having high ecological value is being enhanced.

Through the land and water management plan, the Nari Nari are delivering a sustainably managed and financed conservation property, balancing environmental, economic and sustainability outcomes for managing land and water resources at the site. Importantly, they are delivering an asset for the long-term benefit of Country, the local community and Aboriginal groups.

The Nari Nari Tribal Council is dedicated to conserving the lands and waters on which all life depends. Working with the NSW Government, the council will ensure the long-term land and water management plan objectives are monitored, evaluated and ultimately met.



Water delivery infrastructure at Gayini

Image: Water Infrastructure NSW, Department of Planning and Environment.



Mark Schneider, Gayini land manager, at a wetland in Gayini
Image: Annette Ruzicka.

Planning for healthy Country

In the 1990s, The Nature Conservancy developed a system for managing conservation projects called conservation action planning (CAP). It aims to ensure projects are effective and have the greatest possible impact, using a combination of scientific and project management expertise to plan, implement and measure conservation efforts.

This approach is now used in projects worldwide. In Australia, the approach is being used by more than 20 organisations and being applied to more than 100 projects across the country.

For the Australian context, CAP has been further adapted to incorporate social and cultural values, particularly to better accommodate the values of Indigenous peoples. This process is known as **healthy Country planning**.

Healthy Country planning leads groups through a series of 5 steps:

1. **Deciding what the plan is about** – the first step in creating a healthy Country plan is clarifying the purpose of the plan and what it will focus on, including the vision, scope, the key things groups care about (assets), potential problems (threats) and what is causing problems (situation analysis).

2. **Making the plan** – this step takes teams through developing goals and objectives, strategies and measures to know if they are getting anywhere. This includes developing monitoring plans and results chains (theories of change) on how the strategies will achieve their objectives.
3. **Doing and monitoring the work** – in this step teams take their strategic actions and measures and develop specific annual budgets and workplans for delivering the work.
4. **Deciding if the plan is working** – this step first asks teams to take the time to evaluate whether their plan is working and achieving what they wanted, and whether they need to make any changes.
5. **Telling ourselves and others** – the final step is about communicating progress, including documenting and sharing what teams have learnt so other groups can benefit from their successes and challenges.

Generally, the process for creating a healthy Country plan is done through a series of workshops in co-design, where interested groups, including an area's Traditional Owners, gather to learn about how they can create a plan to look after the land and keep it healthy. The workshops are practical sessions facilitated by an expert coach, helping participants to work through each of the steps above. The tools and outcomes of the workshops are then taken back to their communities, to help guide the process of writing a healthy Country plan.

Credits

Research and writing:
Chels Marshall, Flying Fish Blue

Co-author:
Rene Woods, Nari Nari Tribal Council