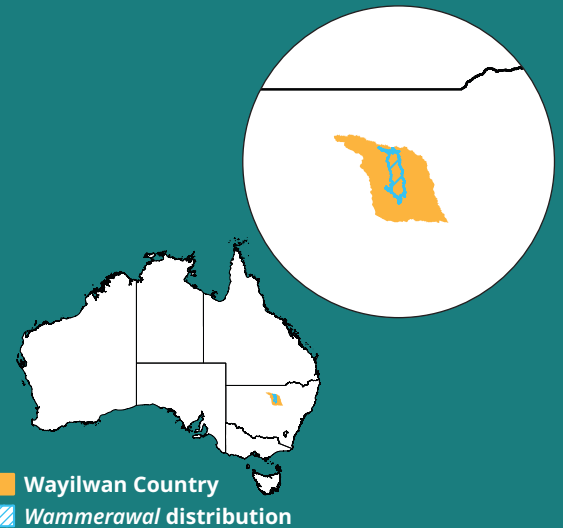


Wammerawal (The Macquarie Marshes) on Wayilwan Country

© Danielle Flakelar, Wayilwan

Common name: The Macquarie Marshes

Language names: *Wammerawal*



Status



International: Partly listed as a Ramsar property.

National: Partly listed on the Register of the National Estate.

Description

Wammerawal is one of the largest inland freshwater wetland systems in south-eastern Australia covering an area of 200,000 ha. It previously spanned approximately 1 million ha before the construction of the Burrendong Dam on *Wambuul* (Macquarie River).

Around 90% of *Wammerawal* occurs on private land with the remaining 10% consisting of the Ramsar Site, which includes the Macquarie Marshes Nature Reserve.

Wammerawal is a very important nesting site for waterbirds in Australia – a total of 77 species have been identified. Monitoring of the waterbirds suggests *Wammerawal* regularly supports 20,000 individuals and over 500,000 in times of large flood.



Wammerawal. Photo: AAP Photo/Dean Lewins.

Distribution

The nationally-listed ecological community titled '[Wetlands and inner floodplains of the Macquarie Marshes](#)' extends from south-east of Brewarrina and includes occurrences near the Ginghet/Marra Creek confluence and Castlereagh/*Wambuul* confluence; west of Merri Merri Creek near Quambone; and north of Warren and includes occurrences upstream of the Marebone Weir near the Junction Creek/*Wambuul* confluence.

Habitat

Wammerawal is a system of freshwater channels, permanent/intermittent streams, ephemeral wetlands and floodplains. It supports a variety of vegetation types including River red gum woodlands, Common reed and Cumbungi wetlands, Water couch grasslands/sedgeland and lignum shrublands. These habitats have evolved in response to the variable flows that result from rainfall and runoff from the upstream catchments.

Threats

- Hydrological changes – anthropogenic
- Climate change
- Clearing for rural development and mining
- Overgrazing and trampling by herbivores
- Invasive plants and animals
- Diseases and pathogens
- Fire regimes that cause declines in biodiversity
- Acid Sulphate Soils and salinity.

Cultural Connections

Wammerawal is a significant meeting place for Aboriginal groups in central north-western New South Wales. Traditional and contemporary practice includes Lore ceremonies. **Wammerawal** is a significant women's site for birthing.

Evidence of **Wammerawal** being used as a gathering place can be seen in the trees (such as Quandong and Belah) which are not from Country, planted by other Nation groups as part of shared ceremony over thousands of years.

*"For us, there is a tree called Colane (Emu apple, *Owenia acidula*), it's really important for us, that's our clan group totem and our responsibility to protect it."*

Danielle Flakelar, Wayilwan

Wayilwan and other nation groups moved throughout **Wammerawal** with seasonal changes, with cultural connections extending to ephemeral creeks and beyond to the Warrumbungles.



Danielle at sunset on Wammerawal. Photo: Richard Kingsford.



© Artwork by Sean Kinchella
Design and layout by Nani Creative

Cultural Values

Wammerawal hold significant Wayilwan cultural heritage along the waterways, including camp areas, earth mounds and dwelling places. The earth mounds demonstrate continued occupation of Country, along with traditional harvesting practices of millet. Over 90 earth mounds have been recorded along **Wambuul**, on both private land and within the Nature Reserve. Some have been ploughed over, but ash is evident from where they used to be.

Wammerawal is a sentient being. It has its own Creation story that we use to define its boundary.

"Wammerawal was created from the Barwon River. Along the River, between Brewarrina and Bourke, was the place where the giant tree was. The land used to be a red flat plain until the tree fell from the north to the south and created Wammerawal. The main trunk of the tree is the Wambuul. The branches are the Castlereagh and the Bogan Rivers. The smaller branches that come off that tree were the other tributaries and catchment areas – such as the Merri Merri Creek and the Marthaguy Creek. The leaves became the plants of Wammerawal and surrounding country."

Danielle Flakelar, Wayilwan

It largely covers the area from Warren to Gongolgon and Coonamble to Nyngan.

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Country

The Creation story of **Wammerawal** gives Wayilwan cultural indicators for the health of Country. Wayilwan knowledge views **Wammerawal** as an interconnected system with species like the Water rat, Sand goanna, snakes, night herons, reed beds, lignum, Red gum, Coolabah and Black box being key indicators of its health. To understand **Wammerawal** and its species, Wayilwan walk through it, getting wet and deeply connecting with Country.

"We as a people are like the night heron, we are quiet and we get on with stuff."

Danielle Flakelar, Wayilwan

Knowledge

The knowledge of **Wammerawal** is important cultural knowledge to pass on to younger generations to maintain our stories and our connection.

"Wayilwan hold significant knowledge about the historic flows of Wammerawal and read signs in Country to understand how the flow is changing. The distribution of soil types in Wammerawal tells Wayilwan which way the waters flow. Wayilwan also have a deep knowledge of the creek systems which flow into Wammerawal and the impact of poor flow regimes on the overall health."

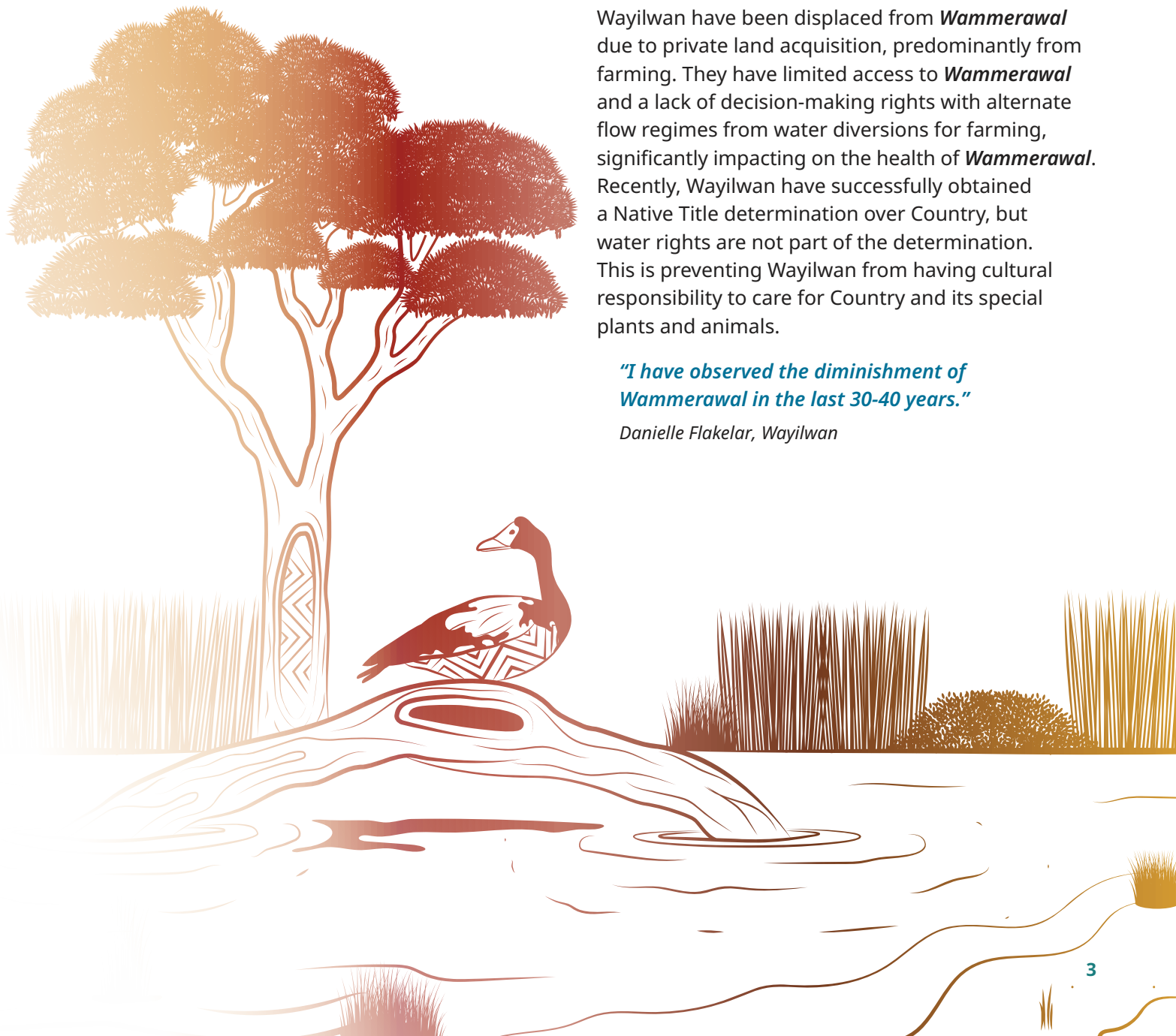
Danielle Flakelar, Wayilwan

Kin

Wayilwan have been displaced from **Wammerawal** due to private land acquisition, predominantly from farming. They have limited access to **Wammerawal** and a lack of decision-making rights with alternate flow regimes from water diversions for farming, significantly impacting on the health of **Wammerawal**. Recently, Wayilwan have successfully obtained a Native Title determination over Country, but water rights are not part of the determination. This is preventing Wayilwan from having cultural responsibility to care for Country and its special plants and animals.

"I have observed the diminishment of Wammerawal in the last 30-40 years."

Danielle Flakelar, Wayilwan



Results of Poor Management

For Wayilwan, the water in *Wammerawal* is not simply a resource – it is a living presence, a giver of life that sustains Country, culture, and community. It nourishes ecosystems, carries the stories of ancestors, and connects generations through an unbroken relationship with the Country – land and water. To reduce this water to a mere commodity is to deny its spirit and sever the sacred bond between people and the life that flows through both.

This perspective calls for a profound shift in how water is valued and managed. It is not an object to be traded but a vital being that underpins ecological balance and cultural continuity. Recognising water as kin honors Indigenous knowledge systems and ensures that decisions about water use uphold the principles of reciprocity, responsibility, and sustainability.

Wayilwan urge policymakers, water managers, and all Australians to embrace this understanding. Protecting *Wammerawal* is not only an environmental imperative; it is a moral obligation to safeguard the living relationships that sustain life for all.

The over-extraction and diversion of water

Wayilwan have witnessed altered flow regimes since the 70s with the construction of Burrendong Dam to service increased farming. More recently, floodplain harvesting and turkey nest dams in *Wammerawal* are impacting on water flow. These changes in flow impact on significant cultural sites and plant distribution, as overbank flows no longer occur in special places.

Altered flow of *Wammerawal* is not allowing for the replenishment of the ground water and filling of the water table. Wayilwan no longer witness cracks of the mud filling with water, coming up from underground ahead of flood waters. Poor water policy has meant that irrigators have a strong influence over water flow and allocation decisions.

Other agricultural practices

Land clearing and stock grazing are having significant impacts on *Wammerawal*. Exclusion fences have been installed, resulting in changes to the distribution of important animals. Poor management practices can have more than just bad environmental outcomes – they affect the social, economic, cultural and overall wellbeing of the surrounding towns and people.

Wayilwan Vision

Access to Country

There is no doubt that the loss of access to *Wammerawal* for our people is a driver for the loss of knowledge and stories.

“Wayilwan want secure access to Country, that includes land and water ownership so there is a culturally safe place for community to practice culture and care for Country.”

Danielle Flakelar, Wayilwan

Water flow decision making

Wayilwan want to be decision-makers for water flow and distribution of water across *Wammerawal*, returning water to the natural flows. With cultural flows allocated from the high security allocation, not environmental water.

“We want water flowing down the old Macquarie River and not being diverted away down the Bulregar, they could do this easily.”

Danielle Flakelar, Wayilwan

Fire management

Wayilwan want to re-establish cultural burns and to do so there needs to be appropriate water allocations so that underground water can protect plant rhizomes.

“A cultural fire regime is critical to managing and enhancing the habitat for those plants and animals that are so important.”

Danielle Flakelar, Wayilwan

Partnerships

In order to improve outcomes for *Wammerawal* and Wayilwan, there needs to be partnership with Traditional Custodians on its management.

“We are not stakeholders, but rather rights holders and we hold key knowledge and connection to Wammerawal that is critical to its ongoing existence and our own.”

Danielle Flakelar, Wayilwan



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Resilient
Landscapes

National Environmental Science Program

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