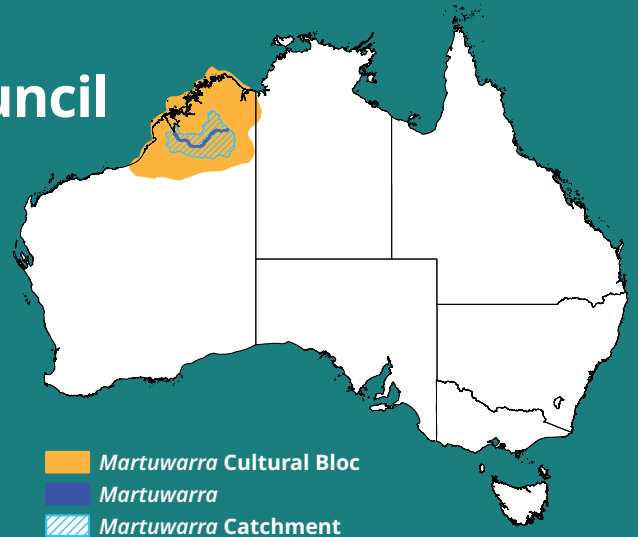


Martuwarra Country and the Martuwarra Fitzroy River Council

© Anne Poelina, Nyikina Warrwa

Common name: Fitzroy River Catchment/Watershed
Language names: *Martuwarra/Mardoowarra Country*
The *Martuwarra* Cultural Bloc includes five language families: Bunuban, Nyulnyulan, Jarrakan, Pama-Nyugan and Worrorran



Status

National: Included in West-Kimberley National Heritage Place. 52 threatened species, 52 migratory species, 82 listed marine species, 12 whales or other cetaceans, three Ramsar wetlands and three wetlands listed on the Directory of Important Wetlands in Australia.

Western Australia: 21 threatened and 294 priority-listed species and ecological communities, two species with special protections and 39 migratory species. *Martuwarra* is the largest registered Aboriginal Cultural Heritage site in Western Australia.

Description

Martuwarra is one of the largest, most pristine and relatively unregulated river systems remaining in Australia, covering approximately 94,000 km².

It is home to ecologically and culturally important species like the Freshwater sawfish, Barramundi, *Mudjala/Majala* (Freshwater mangroves), Silver-leafed paperbarks and Coolibah trees. Of the 35 fish species recorded within the catchment, 18 are endemic.



Martuwarra. Photo: Jackson Gallagher.

Distribution

Martuwarra originates in the Durack and Wunaamin-Miliwundi (formerly King Leopold) Ranges in the Central Kimberley and flows about 730 km west into King Sound, Kimberley Region, far north-west Western Australia.

The catchment is centred around Fitzroy Crossing and extends almost as far east as Halls Creek and west to Derby. Major waterways within the catchment, aside from the Fitzroy River, include Mary River, Margaret River, Christmas Creek, 8 Mile Creek and Geegully Creek.

Habitat

Vegetation in the broader catchment is diverse, including savanna woodlands and spinifex-dominated grasslands. Upstream of Fitzroy Crossing, in the upper catchment, the rivers and tributaries are narrower, more constrained by bedrock. From Fitzroy Crossing out to King Sound, *Martuwarra* Country is a flat, wide floodplain. During the wet season, in summer, the river can extend out to 50 km wide. During this time, the flows connect river pools, off-channel wetlands and creek lines and recharge the aquifer. During the long, dry winter, groundwater-fed river pools act as refugia for a variety of species.

Estuarine and near-shore marine environments at the mouth of the river include mangroves, salt flats, sea grass meadows and coral beds.

Threats

Threats to *Martuwarra* Country include:

- **Climate change**, including food and medicine insecurity, increased temperatures and greater rainfall variability, leading to more frequent floods and droughts
- **Mining and fracking for gas**, leading to land clearance, groundwater extraction, uncontrollable fires (fugitive emissions), groundwater and aquifer contamination and atmospheric pollution
- **Intensive agriculture and irrigation development**, leading to land clearance, habitat degradation, over-extraction of water and altered flows
- **Stock grazing**, leading to habitat degradation, soil compaction and erosion
- **Unregulated tourism**, leading to disturbance of sacred sites, erosion and inappropriate firewood collection
- **Inappropriate fire**, including more frequent high-intensity late dry season fires
- **Invasive species**, such as the feral cats and cane toads.





Cultural Connections

Traditional Custodians (Bunuba, Gooniyandi, Nyikina, Mangala, Warrwa, Walmajarri, Ngarinyin and Kija) within the catchment share a cultural, spiritual and moral obligation to ensure the **Martuwarra** has a right to life and to flow.

[First Law](#) is the collective body of laws of the First Peoples of the land mass currently known as Australia. It is the body of laws that have governed relations between and within First Nations and between human and non-human entities since the beginning of time.

[Martuwarra First Law](#) is grounded in the Rainbow Serpent tradition – a sacred ancestral being that has the right to live and flow. Countless generations have shared stories, song and dance about the Rainbow Serpent. The story teaches the importance of keeping living water healthy.



Martuwarra (Fitzroy) River of Life for All Life.
Artist: Hozaus Claire.

Cultural Values

Country

Martuwarra is communal property, an '[asset in the commons](#)', that belongs to all of us. It must be protected for the benefit of all present and future generations as the life source for those who live in the Kimberley.

Knowledge

Martuwarra is central to keeping knowledge alive; it connects people to Country and it is the host of a detailed knowledge system. As **Martuwarra** becomes sick, knowledge transfer is slowed or lost. **Martuwarra** tells people when it is time to move, time to hunt and time to conduct [ceremony](#).

Kin

Martuwarra is [central to kinship connections](#), united by the common obligation under First Law to care for the river.

“Water is more than a resource that sustains life, it is living itself. This idea is hard for most people to get their heads around.”

Anne Poelina, Nyikina Warrwa¹

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Design and layout by Nani Creative



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Results of Poor Management

Inadequate engagement approach

Currently, water legislation (1914) enables wealthy and powerful individuals and lobby groups with interests in water extraction to apply for water licenses. They use the water for economic development and thus influence development decision-making.

Limitations in water governance principles

The Martuwarra Fitzroy River Council (MFRC) asserts that current Australian state water governance frameworks are a product of colonisation. Previous economic initiatives have stemmed from the myth of the 'empty north' that must be 'developed' and capitalised on through water regulation.

"Since the first settler exploration teams came here to my family's Country in 1879, it has always been about extraction, how many sheep and cattle the land could take, how much water could be taken, what could be dug up, stolen and sold."

Anne Poelina, Nyikina Warrwa¹

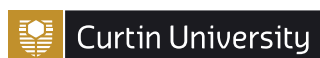
Inadequate planning

The MFRC is concerned that inadequate planning is impacting on the cultural and spiritual health of **Martuwarra**. It is feared that **Martuwarra** could end up like the Murray-Darling Basin with dams and weirs built obstructing movement pathways of Culturally Significant Entities like Barramundi and sawfish. Significant fish deaths could also occur as a result of the over-extraction of water in the system.

There is also concern that we do not yet have all the science (including climate science) particularly around the rate and volumes of aquifer recharge needed to make informed decisions about water management.



National Environmental Science Program



Martuwarra Council Vision

The MFRC seeks to manage the river and its environs as a 'single living entity', and to provide a countervailing perspective to commercial world views. We have prepared a Conservation and Management Plan that sets out our ambitions and obligations to protect **Martuwarra** Country.

Sustainable development

The MFRC wants careful and sustainable development for **Martuwarra** Country.

"We seek new 'forever economies' based on culture, science, and conservation."

Anne Poelina, Nyikina Warrwa

Water allocation planning

The voices of Indigenous people need to be heard in planning, water allocation and development plans to ensure there is just development on just terms.

"We need to ensure that this development is without exploitation because we, as Traditional Owners, are the ones who are going to be most impacted."

Anne Poelina, Nyikina Warrwa²

It is critical that current and future plans are adaptive in terms of climate change, water scarcity and river flow. They need to be able to respond to conditions that are reflected in the landscape. Importantly, to the lived experience stories of Traditional Custodians on the impacts to living waters, food and medicine and how these systems are stressed and changing.

The Martuwarra River Keepers

The MFRC wants to see ongoing support for the Martuwarra River Keepers, which is a workforce of Traditional Custodians using Indigenous and Western science to understand, repair and regenerate **Martuwarra** Country.

Water allocation planning

The MFRC will continue to share stories about the significance of **Martuwarra**, to connect with and inform other Australians through art, film and more.

¹ Poelina A, Carracher, L. *Hearing and feeling Martuwarra Fitzroy River Country. Landscape Architecture Australia. 2025; February.*

² RiverOfLife, M. & Poelina, A. (2020, May 18). *Voices for the Martuwarra. Zenodo. Martuwarra Fitzroy River Council, Broome, WA.*

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