

An aerial photograph of a river winding through a landscape. The river is dark and occupies the central portion of the frame. On the left bank, there is a dense line of green trees and shrubs. The right bank is a wide, flat expanse of brown earth. The lighting is warm, suggesting late afternoon or early morning, with long shadows cast across the terrain.

TRAIL FOR LIFE

PIONEERING NEW ECONOMIES ALONG MARTUWARRA



VCSR
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natural resource
management program



**This project has been supported by funding through the
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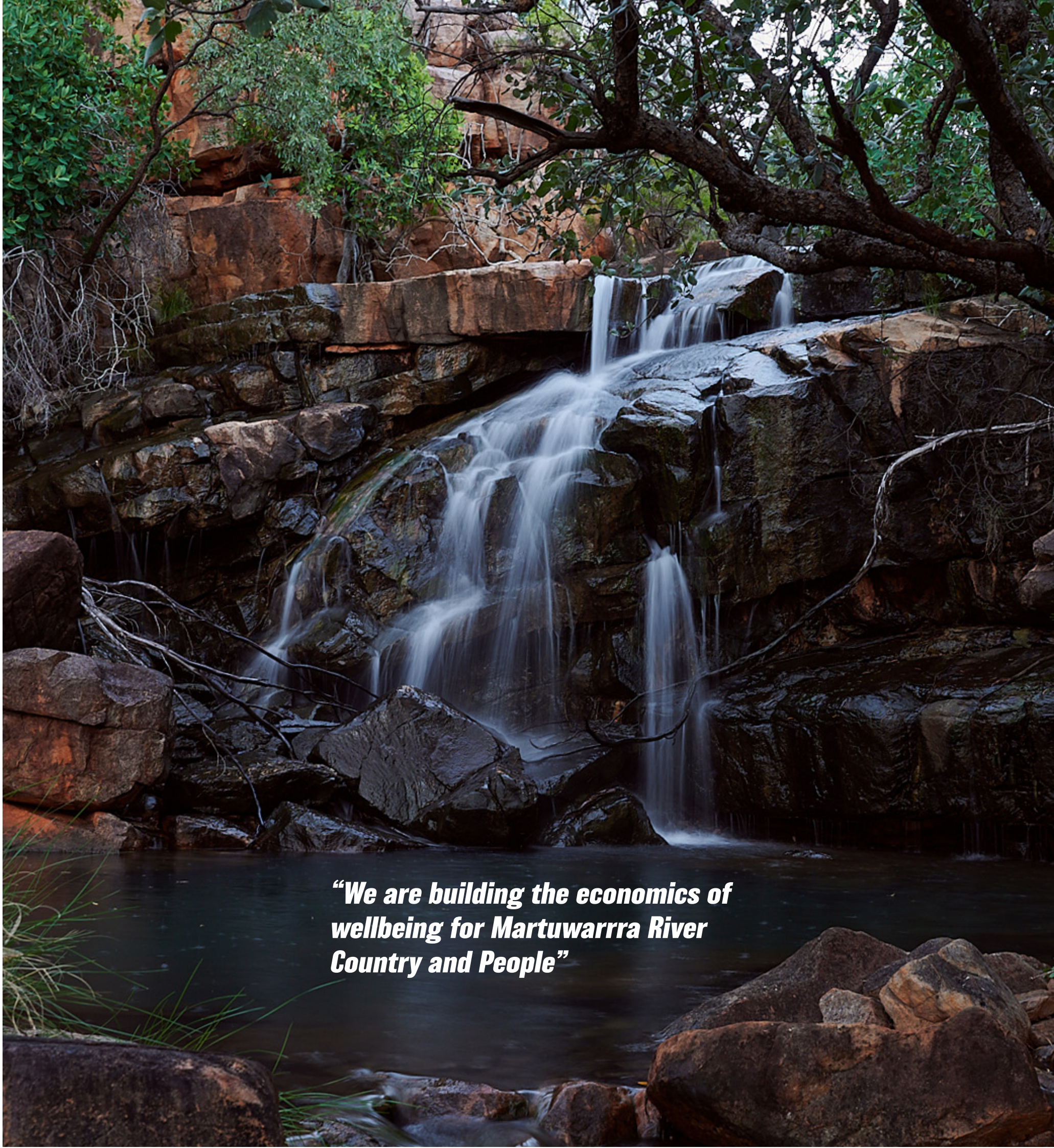
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[The Martuwarra Fitzroy River Council](#) ('MFRC') is an alliance of Elders and young leaders from six independent nations of the Fitzroy River Catchment in the Kimberley, Western Australia. We are an entirely Indigenous led organisation, defending against the destruction of cultural heritage, ecological damage, poverty and climate change. Our vision is to ensure Martuwarra (Fitzroy River), a living ancestor and a global treasure, retains a right to live and flow, while developing sustainable economies for the people of the catchment area.

Indigenous communities are eager to secure environmental markets, including carbon storage, eco-tourism and biodiversity conservation. Massive irrigation and fossilised gas projects are underway in the Martuwarra Catchment. These projects are environmentally devastating and marginalise the values and interests of Indigenous people.

We offer an alternative...



“We are building the economics of wellbeing for Martuwarra River Country and People”



MARTUWARRA RIVER KEEPERS

Who are the Martuwarra River Keepers and what do they do?

Martuwarra River Keepers are Traditional Custodians working on Country to research, manage and protect a globally unique River system. They are Elders and young Indigenous leaders who are empowering innovative, entrepreneurial industry and job creation. This transformative workforce development program is based on Indigenous science, cultural capital and conservation. The Martuwarra River Keepers develop economic opportunities which are focused on restoration, not extraction.

The goals of the Martuwarra River Keepers are:

- Implement MFRC's [Conservation and Management Plan](#)
- Work in partnership with the Shire of Derby (West Kimberley) to develop a Bioregional framework for managing the Martuwarra-Fitzroy Catchment. This includes holding meetings where Martuwarra River Keepers and Shire representatives can connect with global experts in water management
- Research and generate sustainable, regenerative economies. These regional economies will enshrine the cultural and ecosystem value of water and provide long term employment for Aboriginal people
- Undertake specific professional development training to help implement these goals

The concept of Martuwarra River Keepers arose from the '[Circle of Wisdom](#)' - a series of dialogues between Martuwarra Elders and young Indigenous leaders in 2021.

The Martuwarra River Keepers initiative will transition Indigenous community members from a dependence on Centerlink into a sustainable career pathway. This 2-year internship provides participants the opportunity to live and work on Country.

CO-DESIGNING NEW ECONOMIES



River Country Walking Trail

In July 2022 Professor Stephen Muecke and his doctoral Research Assistant, Jennifer Eadie from the University of Notre Dame, spent time on the River Country with members of Yurmulun (Pandanus Park) and Balginjirr communities to conduct the Feasibility Study of the Martuwarra Walking Track. They hold an Australian Research Council grant to research and set up Indigenous walking trails.

Indigenous tourism plays a major part in the national Australian tourism industry, and within that Indigenous-led walking trails represent significant opportunities for Aboriginal communities. There is a growing number of Indigenous-led walking trails across Australia. They have multiple functions:

- They are unique 'tourism products' as small business ventures for Traditional Custodians.
- They enable Aboriginal culture and heritage to remain on Country and keep young people involved.
- They are learning experiences, explicitly so if students are participating as part of coursework, for whom they offer new perspectives on academic knowledges.
- They are immersive experiences for guides and participants, that enable cross-cultural knowledge transfer.
- They enhance health and well-being.

The idea for a Martuwarra River Walking Track was discussed with the Pandanus Park Community (traditional name, Yurmulun, on the Fitzroy River near Willaire Bridge) in July 2022. About 20 community members were in attendance, and the meeting was chaired by Professor Anne Poelina, Chair of the Martuwarra Fitzroy River Council with support from Ian Perdrisat Madjulla Inc. Project Manager and Evaluator.

The Feasibility Study will be presented to the Martuwarra Fitzroy River Council to support the work of the Yurmulun Martuwarra Fitzroy River Keepers to secure investment for training and development and the development of this diverse workforce in their regenerative economies to sustain their lifeways and livelihoods, now and into the future.

The WA Government's investment, through the State Natural Resource Management Program, in this Building Indigenous Capacity in Culture, Tourism and Conservation Economies Project has strengthened the 'Community Research Practitioners' confidence and competence. Through the 'Boab Science' learning and sharing Traditional Custodians have strengthened their capacity to co-design this work in partnership with Professor Muecke.





TWO-WAY SCIENCE

“What’s special about this place is, it’s got spiritual connection to us... Now we want to pass it on to our young generation... The River is important to us... we want to continue sharing it, not only with our children and our families, but other people too, so they can understand how important the River is.”

Boab Monitoring – Protecting the cultural and ecological importance of Boabs

The boabs of Martuwarra are iconic to the region. They hold deep cultural, environmental, and economic significance.

Aboriginal people have propagated and harvested these trees for thousands of years. Their uses include nut carving, food, water and medicine, and the cultural importance of the Kimberley boabs cannot be overstated. Boabs are now sought as a premium super food.

But the survival of this iconic tree is under serious threat. Half of the world’s eight boab species are marked endangered on the International Union Conservation Nature (IUCN) Red List. Never have boabs faced such intense human development pressures.

There is an alarming lack of information regarding the hydrology and habitats that sustain boabs. This is why MFRC and [Madjulla Inc](#) formed a partnership with V & C Semeniuk Research Group to undertake a boab research project. Our boab project is a unique partnership between Traditional Owners and Western scientists to gather critical information on this mighty tree. The Pandanus Park Boab team currently volunteer monthly to monitor and record changes in water tables of various sites. This project is providing vital valuation data. It aims to fill an existing knowledge gap in relation to the economic value of environmental (biodiversity and ecosystem) services on Country.

The Martuwarra River Keepers can combine Indigenous, traditional knowledge practices with Western science to continue and expand the Boab monitoring project. This promotes environmental stewardship and community-based resource management. Research is crucial to preserving Australia’s rich ecological heritage for generations to come.

Building Business and Research Partnerships

MFRC has already developed key partnerships with major Universities and global experts in water science. The Martuwarra River Keepers can broaden these partnerships to help grow sustainable economies in the Kimberley.

One example of such an economy is carbon banking. There is massive potential for the People of Martuwarra to create sustainable employment through carbon banking. This involves fostering national and global business partnerships. With investment, the Martuwarra River Keepers can begin a feasibility study on large-scale carbon banking in the River Country. Once the research and planning component is complete the Martuwarra River Keepers can begin promoting and expanding carbon banking economies.

This aspect of the project has the potential to incorporate the Dampier Peninsular into a broader, bioregional approach to conservation and resource management. This can be initiated by supporting the Martuwarra River Keepers to hold meetings with the various other stakeholders and neighbouring Traditional Owners.

Our Elders and young Indigenous leaders hold ancient knowledge of Country. This knowledge is far more intimate and complex than Western science can hope to achieve in the limited time frame imposed by climate change.

Native species are facing rapid extinction. The Martuwarra River Keepers are best placed to research, monitor and protect the Kimberley’s keystone fauna. Many successful studies have been conducted in collaboration with Indigenous people on the freshwater Sawfish.

The Sawfish is of immense cultural value to Indigenous people and it is integral to maintaining balance for all species inhabiting the River system. The Martuwarra River Keepers can continue an Indigenous led program of study, taking full advantage of the partnerships already established by MFRC.

Partnership with Madjulla Inc.

Madjulla Inc. is a partner organisation of MFRC and has a track record of due diligence, cultural integrity and accountability. The organisation has created the Majala Wilderness Centre, at Balginjirr Community. The centre boasts a large auditorium with a commercial kitchen and 12 cabins. It is a purpose built venue to run workshops, host meetings and provide a base of operations to the Martuwarra River Keepers.

Madjulla Inc. will auspice the financial and workforce development of the Martuwarra River Keepers.





THE MAJALA WILDERNESS CENTRE

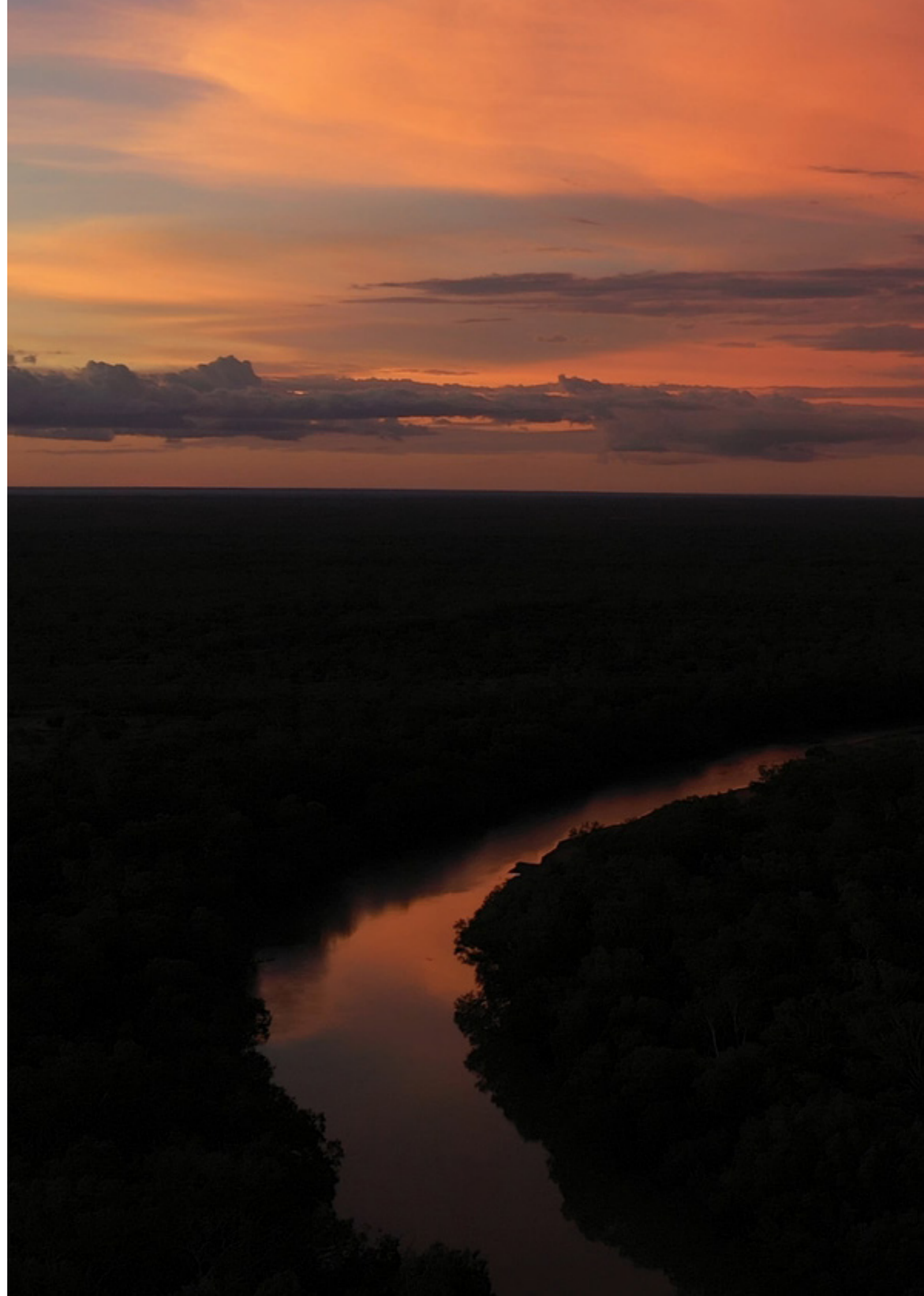
MABOO LIYAN BOOROO

“We know this Country before white men ever set foot on this earth, this place. And a lot of the knowledge that we have, we want to share and have that respect... just like we’re putting people into our eye that can see what we see for Country. And all the people, they read so much book, but if they come and walk and listen and look, and learn...”

The Martuwarra Fitzroy River is Western Australia’s largest River and largest listed Aboriginal cultural heritage site. It has been cared for by First Law and Indigenous land management practices for millennia. Over the last 150 years, it has experienced multi-scalar damage from agriculture, mining and invasive species. Interventive measures are now required to improve the health of the River and the communities that live along it’s banks.

In November 2021, a consortium of researcher; Dr Martin Brueckner (Murdoch University), Dr Sven Ouzman (University of Western Australia), Dr Tod Jones (Curtin University of Technology), and Dr Naomi Godden (Edith Cowan University), in partnership with Prof. Anne Poelina, Managing Director (Madjulla Inc.), Chair of the Martuwarra Fitzroy River Council and Professor and Co-Chair Indigenous Studies, University of Notre Dame secured external funding for this ‘Murdoch Science Team’ to travel to the Kimberley. The November workshop created the opportunity for the researchers to hear first-hand from community members about cultural, environmental, and spiritual values along the Martuwarra Fitzroy River.

Yurmulun and Balkinjirr helped the team create a map, which details important cultural sites between the two communities. It was developed to showcase how these values can be threatened by unjust development. It identifies the need for good two-way science: Aboriginal and Western science coming together to consider new, non-extractive economies which sustain Aboriginal peoples’ lifeways and livelihoods. A report was provided to the community after the November 2021 workshop.



BUILDING CAPACITY

In August 2022 the Murdoch Science Team secured additional resources to conduct a 3 day workshop at Yurmulun (Pandanus Park) Community in partnership with Ian Perdrisat from Madjulla Inc. Ian acknowledged the WA state government investment through the State Natural Resource Management (NRM) Program funding from the 'Boab Science Project' has strengthened the Community Research Practitioners' confidence and competence through learning and sharing. They have expanded their capacity to co-design this 3 day work in partnership with the Murdoch Science Team.

Regenerative Pathways

Senior native title holders on the Martuwarra Fitzroy River Council (MFRC) have identified the need for regenerative development pathways for Martuwarra communities. They have directed the research team to co-design a pilot initiative with Yurmulun Pandanus Park that can be replicated along the length of the River and its catchment. This process is documented in the 'Indigenous consultation and engagement' section.

The Murdoch Science Team, in partnership with Yurmulun Community, are proposing a co-designed programme of mapping 'Country is Changing' stories and riparian zone management through mechanical removal and burning along a 23 kilometre stretch of river upstream of Yurmulun Community. Using a collaborative process, the Yurmulun Community identified the concept Maboo Liyan Booroo, 'Good Spirit Country'. The Murdoch Science Team will develop, document and communicate a replicable model for regenerative riparian socio-economic management for Aboriginal research users along the Martuwarra.

The Murdoch Science Team will present the Research Plan to the Yurmulun and Balginjirr communities to secure education, research, and training investment to support the applied research work of the Yurmulun Martuwarra Fitzroy River Keepers.

Where To Next

These 'Community Research Practitioners' have led the co-design of the evaluation of the Building Indigenous Capacity in Culture, Tourism and Conservation Economies Project. We look forward to sharing this evaluation, including a short film about the project and where to next. The State NRM Program investment has created the opportunity for the Community Research Practitioners to establish a diverse workforce, with further education, training, and research. Watch this space and follow the development and investment in to the Yurmulun Martuwarra Fitzroy River Keepers.



MAINTAINING BALANCE

The people of Martuwarra have maintained ecological balance since the beginning of time, by following principles of place-based conservation. Indigenous science has an unparalleled ability to preserve biodiversity in the face of imminent climate disaster. Indigenous people are the most qualified to restore balance to each respective bio region. Our Elders and emerging young leaders still hold the knowledge needed to bring climate chaos back into balance. Supporting the Martuwarra River Keepers means resourcing these knowledge holders, amplifying their ability to heal Country and restoring climate security to all species.

MFRC has the unique capacity to broker partnerships with the world's leading academics, scientists and legal practitioners. MFRC also represents the interests of 6 different language groups across the catchment. In a spirit of collaboration, MFRC is future proofing Indigenous leadership in the Kimberley and amplifying the voice of marginalised communities.

Securing investment will form an exciting partnership. We will ensure this investment builds the capacity of Indigenous people on the ground to conserve and protect our precious inheritance, for all future generations of all species.



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