

# Draft Great Artesian Basin Strategic Management Plan 2018



A sacred spring near Walgett.

A brief submission from

## Dharriwaa Elders Group

that insists that Australian Governments better  
manage this highly valued water source.

9 November 2018

### **About Walgett's Dharriwaa Elders Group**

The Dharriwaa Elders Group<sup>1</sup> (DEG) takes a leading interest in the protection and maintenance of Aboriginal Cultural Values ("ACVs") in Walgett landscapes. DEG was born 20 November 2000 after Elders had worked together on projects since 1998. The Group took its name from one of its sacred sites – the RAMSAR-listed Narran Lakes - Dharriwaa (common meeting place) and its full members are Aboriginal people over 60 who live in Walgett. With the aid of governments, sponsors and volunteers, the organisation has worked to support Aboriginal Elders to resume leadership roles in the community, keep active and healthy; promote local Aboriginal cultural knowledge and identity; and develop the Walgett Aboriginal community.

An important activity has been to protect and manage the ACVs of the Walgett area. This activity has involved supporting the people who hold the knowledge that provides Aboriginal Cultural Values, understanding and documenting Elders' knowledge and mapping significance in the landscape. It has involved conducting education activities including exhibitions, magazine production, schools programs, community induction for government and community education programs. It has also involved advocacy and negotiation with landholders and governments which has sometimes produced outcomes that have protected culturally significant places from destruction. It has involved maintaining knowledge and other productivity infrastructure and continually training and mentoring local Aboriginal staff at levels determined by scarce resources. The Dharriwaa Elders Group values its relationships and collaborations with scientists so that together, we can assist governments and the Australian nation better understand and manage valuable natural and knowledge assets.

### **The Walgett Aboriginal community highly values the Great Artesian Basin.**

Our stories include the creation of underground waters and we try to maintain our links with those waters on Country around Walgett, taking school groups and younger people to them regularly, so the knowledge of their locations and significance is maintained. Access to these important water places must not be restricted. Access is a constant issue for the Walgett Aboriginal community as law regarding crown lands change and landholders increasingly come to regard lands they lease or manage as their own exclusive property.

Today, the community of Walgett survives on 100% Great Artesian Basin ("GAB") water, because our water supply can no longer be sourced from the Namoi and Barwon Rivers. Dharriwaa Elders Group blames poor water planning by NSW and Commonwealth Governments for this recent state of affairs. Water planning has not preferenced community water supplies over industry. Times of drought and climate change have not been accommodated by water plans. Monitoring of compliance by licensed industry water users has not been resourced adequately.

GAB water is high in salt<sup>2</sup> and our community cannot be forced to rely on it for drinking because of the impact high salt levels have on our existing high chronic disease burden.

The high salt levels of GAB water cannot be a long-term water source for Walgett's community garden. As our town will increasingly rely on locally grown gardens, the current reliance on GAB water is a food security issue as well.

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<sup>1</sup> a charitable incorporated Association with deductible gift recipient status.

<sup>2</sup> NSW Health Pathology Forensic & Analytical Science Service water testing in Walgett 1/5/18 measured a Sodium level of 296 mg/L which is considered quite high.



GAB water must not be accepted as Walgett's sole water source. Who has decided that industry has a greater right to increasingly contested river water supplies in North West NSW? People must come first. Industries requiring high levels of river water, and wastefully evaporating large amounts of water from irrigation channels, must be regulated to transition away from their reliance on valuable river and ground waters. Financial mechanisms must be used to reflect the true cost to Australia of our water resources, and industries that are highly subsidized by our failing health and wellbeing currently must not be able to continue operating at our community's expense. Mining industries must not be given free river or ground waters. This subsidy to their businesses comes at a huge cost to our communities. Financial disincentives and law must be used to encourage more equitable water sharing between industry, communities and the environment.

GAB water is finite, and must be available for emergency use for country populations for short terms, and so must be managed carefully for this reason. Management of GAB water must ensure that it is not wasted. Dharriwaa Elders Group applauds the capping of bores around Walgett so that the precious GAB resource is sustained, even though we enjoyed yabbing in the free-flowing bore drains of the recent past.

We know that GAB waters interact with our rivers around Walgett. We are not sure why these deep holes are running dry, and believe that if more science is applied to protecting the GAB aquifers and water pressures, then these interactions may flourish again.

Dharriwaa Elders Group members are concerned that invasive industrial activities like coal and CSG mining to the east, threaten to interfere with and pollute GAB aquifers. It is our understanding that the science is currently under-supported to understand the GAB aquifers. DEG believes that the Precautionary Principle dictates that a lot more science must be done in order to make sure that GAB aquifers are safe for future generations of people and other living species. Invasive industries that today threaten the GAB must not proceed without NSW and Commonwealth regulators understanding how to safeguard important natural resources like the Great Artesian Basin.

Dharriwaa Elders Group values the unique biodiversity around the GAB springs in the Walgett region. Very little understanding or value is given to their management and protection, because very little scientific work has been done to define them and their values. Through DEG's community-led Yuwaya Ngarrali partnership with the University of NSW<sup>3</sup> we are working to rectify this and look forward to hosting appropriately-managed groundwater and associated biodiversity research projects. We are currently planning a long term Aboriginal Ranger enterprise to facilitate this and other Aboriginal Cultural Heritage management work. In these ways Dharriwaa Elders Group and its partners hope to contribute to Australia's knowledge base regarding our country's unique and valuable natural assets, so that they can be managed better in the future.

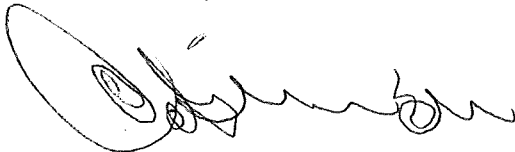
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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.dharriwaeldersgroup.org.au/index.php/yuwayangarrali>. Look for [www.yuwayangarrali.org.au](http://www.yuwayangarrali.org.au) coming soon

Dharriwaa Elders Group requests that

1. The Great Artesian Basin Strategic Management Plan is guided by Objects that recognize the importance of GAB to all aspects of the wellbeing of Aboriginal people.
2. Wasting of the GAB is curbed.
3. Ageing infrastructure that threatens the safety of the GAB is addressed.
4. Processes and actions that could threaten the health and sustainability of the GAB are recognized by urgently-undertaken audits, and stopped.
5. The economic value of GAB water must be identified and in the process, the value of its protection and maintenance, and its value to communities in regional and remote Australia, recognised. GAB water must never be given free of charge to industries.
6. Unsustainable industries that are currently propped-up with huge quantities of water that would otherwise be contributing to the wellbeing and economic development of our community must be forced to engage in an economic system that decreases the financial benefits they currently receive because their water inputs are not properly valued.
7. Surviving and new industries that impact on GAB are better regulated and their activities highly managed in order to protect this finite precious resource.
8. Compliance of plans for managing the GAB is resourced so that powerful interests and influencers are not allowed to unfairly use or destroy a resource that belongs to all species including the environment.
9. Scientific research is supported and undertaken in partnership with Aboriginal communities to understand the GAB and its associated biodiversity.
10. Aboriginal community enterprises are supported to undertake GAB management.
11. Surface and groundwaters are better managed so that towns like Walgett are not forced to rely on GAB waters and so that GAB waters remain healthy and available for emergencies.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Virginia Robinson', with a large, stylized initial 'V'.

Virginia Robinson

**Secretary for and on behalf of the Dharriwaa Elders Group 9 November 2018.**