



Waters as Part of Our Sovereign and Spiritual Journey

Yirrabal Gwe-arnj Yirrabal Jooginj

Uncle Lewis Walker¹ · Ria Jago¹ · Nicoletta Denticio¹

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Abstract

This article unfolds a recorded conversation between three people and a sacred clear-flowing River (*Wonga Beerie Balan*, Rocky River), across cultures, ontologies, and languages. Here, Cultural Elder Uncle Lewis Walker (Uncle Lewis) shares little-known knowledges of the Wahlurbal (West Bundjalung) of the Northern Rivers, NSW, Australia, about Water—as sentient, agentic, and sovereign.

Keywords First Nations · Wahlurbal of the Northern Rivers · Sacred law · Rocky River

This article unfolds a recorded conversation between three people and a sacred clear-flowing River (*Wonga Beerie Balan*, Rocky River), across cultures, ontologies, and languages. Here, Cultural Elder Uncle Lewis Walker (Uncle Lewis) shares little-known knowledges of the Wahlurbal (West Bundjalung) of the Northern Rivers, NSW, Australia, about Water—as sentient, agentic, and sovereign. The growing impact globally of First Nations cultural knowledge in protecting ecologies, (*Waratah Coal Pty Ltd v Youth Verdict Ltd & Ors (No 6) [2022] QLC 21 2022*), even while mining and other extraction continue to destroy and pollute sacred, storied places and bodies, is the most important message of this dialogue. For the benefit of water specialists and advocates globally, Uncle Lewis orally shares aspects of his storied River law. These are small ripples of deeper, sacred law that enables River to return to balance. He requests that you, in sharing this conversation and learning to hear River story and law, *ngaya nga gangale yi*—listen well; *ni ye nga bogunyi*—understand well; *garama*—with respect; *mala boogle mah*—with good intent.

Becoming River

We recommend that readers use headphones to deepen their sensory engagement with River, as they are introduced, and begin to know River, as She arrives on a warm Winter's Day. For those wishing to plunge in, you may wish to set aside an hour to listen to the original conversation,¹ to allow the authentic voices of River and Humans to come forward directly.² *Wonga Beerie Balan* can be heard flowing in the background—along with Magpie calls, and other sounds from Country. The listener is invited to continue to 'tune in' to Country's voices; to sense River's agency, interest, and collaboration in this conversation. With Uncle Lewis's permission, communications 'live and direct' from River are provided by means of two photographs (made before the final review with Uncle Lewis) and a sound file made with River, from River's edge several metres upstream from the photograph site.

✉ Nicoletta Denticio
ndenticio@sidint.org

¹ Society for International Development (SID), Washington, USA

¹ <https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/evk413dkktvph43nodd/ZOOM0044-UncL-Nico-Ria-120422.WAV?dl=0&rlkey=xcro32pzlub6zzyexlsn35y2j>.

² The text is slightly edited from the original sound file, for ease of reading.



Wonga Beerie Balan 'Boulder Garden': 7:15am, 11.09.23
Wonga Beerie Balan: 'Mist': 7:17am, 11.09.23 Soundfile, (12 pm on 11.09.23)



Who We Are

Uncle Lewis Walker: *Ngaya nedi Yirrabal nga guyan ni*—My name is Spirit Possum; *ngeeyin nga Yirrabal nga Joogoon ni*—Spirit of the Night. I am a cultural Elder for Wahlurbal, Western Bundjalung, and speak for the thirteen Rivers of the Northern Rivers, of New South Wales, Australia, through my Father and my Mother's side. I am an educator, artist and musician, I live here with Rocky River *Wonga Beerie Balan* and share my knowledge to protect my River and my People who depend on River for our health and our cultural survival.

Ria (Marianne) Jago: I am Celtic-Scottish-Anglo-descended, of four, five, and six (at least) generations born and returned into Country in Australia. I have no home other than with this beloved land that breathes me. I belong with this great land in the way that I belong, but not in the deep-time way Uncle Lewis belongs. I am a lawyer and policy writer, and musician, and now a PhD Student in the Faculty of Law and Society at Sunshine Coast University in QLD, Australia. I am listening with River to hear River's emergent knowledges.

Nicoletta Denticò: I am Italian, living in Rome, lover of Olive Trees and Waters, Mountains and Music. I am a writer and global public health specialist. I was very involved in the international struggle to ban antipersonnel landmines and remain strongly committed to disarmament. Formerly director of Médecins Sans Frontières in Italy, I have spent my last 25 years as an activist and a right to health advocate. I now lead the global public health justice programme at Society for International Development (SID). I am passionate about deeper questions of ecology, and about how to connect with deep knowledges that—we know—are waiting to help us if we just listen.

Context and Method

This conversation took place at Rocky River *Wonga Beerie Balan*, Australia, with Uncle Lewis, and Ria; and Nicoletta joining on zoom from Rome, Italy. Uncle Lewis is a close friend of Ria's elder sister Helen, and he is now Ria's cultural guide on her PhD. Nicoletta met Ria and Helen in India in March 2023 at the global meeting of Diverse Women for Diversity held at Dr Vandana Shiva's Navdanya Ecological Farm in Deradhun. They travelled in a small group of women to Rishikesh on the Ganges River, where they spent time singing, swimming and listening with the River waters. Nicoletta heard them speak of Uncle Lewis and how he hears

and sees Rivers in ways invisible to industrialized senses. The idea of this conversation took root, as Nicoletta and Ria look to reorient public policy and law in ways that can hear the knowledges and memory of Water. Ria travelled three hours by car to Rocky River, to meet Uncle Lewis at his *Gunya* (home) by mid- afternoon—to give Nicoletta the right timing in Italy. Ria recorded the conversation on her Zoom H2n field recorder and made an initial transcript, which Nicoletta edited for a global audience. Months later, Ria travelled a second time to *Wonga Beerie Balan* Rocky River to seek clarity on several concepts, and reworked the transcript to include Uncle Lewis' and River's final revisions. Uncle Lewis shares stories, while *Wonga Beerie Balan* Rocky River flows in the near background. We are contemplating our relationships with place, and sharing our conversation with you because this is how humans learn how to know, belong with, and protect, the places they live and visit (Hughes and Barlo 2021). As the natural world calls humans ever more urgently to listen to its voices and stories, we learn together what it is asking of us.



Uncle Lewis Reviews Paper



Shimmer



Terms and Concepts

Country—is an Indigenous Australian expression which may be defined simply as place, family and identity (Rose 2016). It encompasses land, sea, and sky, as well as living stories and knowledges held within the place. Country is place and process, human and spirit Beings; outside and inside time, and space; sentient, decaying, growing, multi-dimensional, and multi-temporal (Rose 2016). It is the place and process of continuing creation, and mutual care (Country et al. 2016). Indigenous peoples globally refer to similar, vast, cosmological and quotidian aspects of the places they belong with.

Dreaming—not to be confused with imagination or a state of being asleep, the Dreaming is a state of existence incarnated by Earth; a force that passes throughout all the inherent ‘energies’ found within matter, the ‘so-called vital forces of the species that constitute the Dreaming and life’ (Glowczewski 2020). Storied, it is often transmitted and shaped through oral traditions incorporating dance and song. For the attentive non-Indigenous listener, emplaced mythological Dreaming story can allow one to sense place, rather than human, as the centre of life (Country et al. 2015; RiverOfLife et al. 2020), and the many ways our lives and human consciousness itself are entangled with the natural world (Akomolafe 2015a; Country et al. 2016).

Story—Indigenous culture holders globally have made available, often through story, the ontological worlds and concepts of our shared planet (Akomolafe 2015b; Wall-Kimmerer, 2017; Woollorton et al. 2017; Wright et al. 2020; Country et al. 2022). Its impact on western

scholarship and language is significant. Ria and Nicoletta feel privileged to hear first-hand from Uncle Lewis stories from River, and to experience subtle shifts in understanding that emplaced story enables.

ND: With you, Uncle Lewis, I would like to talk about the immense and not sufficiently known environment which is waters. It is indispensable to hear the perspective of a person who, like you, has always cared to co-exist with this environment without destruction. Talking about waters, we think about the waters of the ocean, and of the rivers. These ecosystems are so important for our life. What do we know, and above all, what do we not know about them?

UL: We have got our Dreamtime story of creation, our story of how our mighty rivers were created in our Country. *Guriabal* from a long time ago, back then when it happened. The *Gaungan* and the *Balligan*, it was created by a love story, our sacred river.

Boogooroogu Bowg nee anj: the might Clarence River that flows through the Mountains from many tribes to the great blue sea. So, in our language, *Boogooroogu Bowg nee anj*, is a creation from our ancient stories that was passed down to us. What water represents in our tribe is life. Water is part of our sovereign journey and spiritual journey that we live on Country. Water is a source that gives us food, grows our medicines. It’s also a home for all the animals that live in the river, in all water ways. And then it washes all to the great blue sea.

Some say our River dries up in our Dream time stories, others say the River, which is *Boogooroogu Bowg nee-anj*, the Mighty Clarence River, will never stop running.



Wonga Beerie Balan, the Rocky River; *Yugulbah Balan*, the Washpool River; *Narawal Nga Jagan na balan noo nga nga booroon nyi*, the Brunswick River, are all Rivers of my Country. *Minjinbul*, the Tweed River, will never stop running.

Our stories are all based around the sacred waterways, 13 Rivers in one nation called the *Bundjalung nation*. The water, which gives us our spiritual journey, we follow through the seasons as it changes. The trees when it flowers, it lets us know when food is ready, the bark when it peels off the trees lets us know what is happening in the ocean, it is food time for the big white pointy sharks, for all the dangerous animals in the ocean. These are the things that our waterways let us know.

We go turtle diving, we wait for the season to change, in summertime, we wait for the big storm to come. Because turtles go in hibernation over winter and come out in summertime. We wait for the big thunderstorms. The vibration wakes them up and lets them know that summertime is coming, the time for breeding and laying their eggs. The goanna, the snake, and the water lizard, even the porcupine, the echidna, the *Djoonbung* which is the platypus, they all lay their eggs at the same time, when Big Storm comes. Then when Lightning comes, it cracks them open. That is how we go by our seasons. We never rob the nest of the catfish. We wait for the next season, to let them breed, so it is all about knowing that water law. Because water law is so sacred to our animals. Our animals are so important, we take notice of our animals, our animals give us the sign of when the food is ready, they tell us what food not to eat, they show us all the signs that we understand. Because we are so connected to the sacred law that the land gave us.

ND: Uncle Lewis, you are referring to the water law, and the land law, in their spiritual dimension. So, this means that the cycles you speak of are not merely a question of ecological balance. Right?

UL: In the theology and the cathedral of science—we live in it every day. We wait for six months at a time for the season to change as the years go by. We wait, patient. We sit, we observe and teach our young ones, our next generations, about the changing seasons, especially when it comes to the River. We are not allowed to rob the nest of the animals that live there. We can't break the water law, or the river law. The river has got its law, and the best memory in the world because it's got a memory bank, a memory for both sides of the riverbanks. Our memory is all along the river. She is the best gardener in the world. Mother Nature does it all for us. The river way is where the old people used to do the grinding of the medicines, and the grinding of the flour to make the bread. It's where they used to sharpen their spearheads and tools and weapons to gather more food. So, the River was everyday living to us, and still is today. We live off waters every day, our animals our plants.

Boogooroogu Bowg nyi anj, nyi a nga baigon na balan noo gayin.

Down in Mum's Country, the Mann River runs north into the southeast flowing Mighty Clarence, the Woman River. My river here (*Wonga Beerie Balan*, Rocky River) also runs north into the Mighty Clarence River. Every other river runs southeast. Where the Mann River runs into the Mighty Clarence, that is where saltwater meets fresh water. It's a sacred place, where we go and teach the children about the sacred elements of water—of how it changes in the same river. [*Uncle Lewis uses dance-like gestures with his hands and body as he tells the story, to show how the waters meet and create a whirlpool; how the currents run alongside each other in opposite directions; and how the current returns him to the place he began*]. So, I go turtle diving, and I go catch a current this way, but I'm in the same river, but there is another current in the same river this way. So that turtle will go in here and come back the other way. So, I jump in the other current to get back to where I was. So, this is the sacred river that I live on.

For example, when the bull shark comes, you've got to sit quiet and wait for the shadow to go past and you have permission to get out of the River then. The river is an initiation place for young men, to take the fear out of the young warriors. Water is a part of our initiation, it is closely linked to our fertility sites for females, the place where they do their birthing. These are the sacred mystical waterways that run through *Boogoorooga bowgnee-anj* or *Wonga Beerie Balan* the Mighty Clarence or the Rocky River.

That is why water is so sacred to me and my people. We are water people. This is my Dad's Country, in the *Wahlur-bal* western nation of the *Bundjalung*. My Mum's Country is *Yaegel*, East Coast of the *Bundjalung*. I belong to a big nation. I belong to many Rivers. I hold stories and languages of the thirteen Rivers of our Country, that flow through the seven clans of the *Bundjalung* nation, east and west of the Great Dividing Range. Those clans are called:

Ngaya wadjale ngaya banjalangeh; Ngaya wadjale mindjenbal Gidabal ngaya nga widjabal; Yaegal Gum-baynggirr; Bullina; Wyabal widjabal; Ngaya Wahlur-bal nga; Gallabal

I was taught song and dance for many rivers, and creation stories of many rivers, connected to the stars. We call them our glass hour. The sky is our glass hour of a night. So it is very important to look after the water ways and the shores of the ocean. From all the desecrations of the past, it builds up. Not only on Country, but in the people that bear witness to the truth of what happened to many rivers and to the people that lived on the rivers.

ND: Uncle Lewis, thank you. While you were speaking, I was thinking about my country, Italy, surrounded by water. Only a few generations ago, people used to live in a solid and



healthy relationship with water, mindful of what nature had provided for them. People lived in harmony and paid respect to the multiple signs and lessons of nature. Your beautiful Dreamtime stories, every country used to have them. In other words, what you have told us seems to embody a form of universal knowledge, don't you think? This knowledge and relationship appear to be lost now to the point that we are literally risking human life on Earth. In what way do you think we can recover the profound ancestral wisdom of your stories and the relationship with nature that is so vital for us on this Earth?

UL: Our Dreamtime stories kept us alive today.

A long, long *guriabal*, [back then when it happened], we have our stories from our Dreaming. As you said, 'we are surrounded by water': so, we have to tread lightly and speak softly to heal many rivers from all around the world. Speak softly, to tread lightly again. We do it hand in hand in our journey to respect, to go forward, to create unity, which is so important for a strong community that is capable to protect mystical waterways. The grass roots people from all Countries around the world have stories from sacred rivers. And our story of the river is connected with our Star Dreaming through the glass hour.

I mentioned the glass hour earlier—the sun comes up, sun goes down, the glass hour comes. We are looking through water at the sacred stars that twinkle and dance and tell us it will be a windy day for the next couple of days. We see the stars moving and dribbling and sinking, that is how we know. That is how we know. It is going to be very windy, and they even tell us when it is going to rain.

So, this is part of us, our Dreaming is up there, too. And we all belong to the same water source Dreaming. When the rain comes down in a natural way, it comes all over the world. When River rises, and floods and tsunami come, they wash away the saddest pain and the worst memory that was ever thought of. We look at Mother nature. Sometimes it's good to forgive and give back to Mother as we tread lightly and speak softly and walk hand in hand to a journey of respect for the today, for the tomorrow, for the future. Because our stories and our maps of our riverways are from all over the world. I know which are your stars, Nicoletta, because we can see them in our Country. It is a map for us, the stars, knowing which country belongs to which star. We know which country lies beneath that star. So our Dreaming belongs forever, we've just got to look up every night and remind ourselves. Up there they look so close together, the stars, but down here we are so far apart.

And that is the hourglass of the night that helps us clear our way for a better future.

Ngaya wadjale...nurumbul. We call it the glacier clouds, Possum Dreaming³ to me. My grandfather is the glacier clouds up there in the sky, what you see at nighttime. They are my grandfather, the eyes in the sky are possum eyes. *Barbra Gaya*, also Emu, is my grandmother, the sleeping emu in the sky, also the *Djirrabil*, of my grandfathers, and their grandmothers and their grandfathers and their grandmothers and their grandfathers.

Yogombe Yalgan, there was no sun back then, we lived in darkness, but we knew where the water was, *murrugai*, we smelt the water also, knew where to walk, where to sleep, we knew our neighbours, the voice, the song the dance, the stories, then creation of light, living on a place so beautiful, still here today telling stories about what happened back then right to this day. Sitting up there on the shores of the milky way is a universal spiritual enlightenment journey. I live in the bush with these old people out here, in the spirit world, and it is so healing. They're our protection for the future, like I said, we must unite with the Origine people of many rivers. We need to grow the food, both sides of the river from the mountains down to the oceans, from the ocean back to the mountains.

When they are thirteen years old, our children become the doctors and professors of the sacred plants. We are the last people, the last Country in the world to collect the water from the Artesian basin. We are caretakers, belonging to this Country, we were given a job to do, all as one mob, *belogaman*, coming together as one mob, unity. *Boogle bare*, thank you for listening.

ND: Uncle Lewis you said the land of the Country was given to you, so you are the caretakers. In many ways, only in your knowledge lies the possibility of granting our very human survival on the Earth, while we still live in a state of denial. What are today the direst threats that menace your people and your stories, and the culture of life that comes with your knowledge?

UL: The poisoning of the water ways. Most of our waterways are getting poisoned. We live at the bottom of the mountains, all tribes do in our Bundjalung, we are mountain people who live on Rivers. Our rivers are the main place

³ 'Now look at the Southern Cross—a possum in a tree, according to the Boorong people—and look at the dark cloud to the left of it. That cloud is called the Coalsack by astronomers, and is the birthplace of new stars, but to many Aboriginal groups it's one of the best-known constellations—the Emu in the Sky. The Coalsack is the head of the emu. Stretching away to its left you should be able to see its long, dark neck, round body and finally the legs. It's a spectacular sight—far better than the contrived European constellations that most of us grew up with. Once you've seen it, the Milky Way will never look the same again' (Norris 2008).



for our children to go hunting. In the mountains we have the Shire Councils (the local governments) which fill in the land with old waste cars and car batteries and utilize it as a dump and fill it in to stop erosion. They have been doing that for the last fifteen years. I have got it all documented and reported. I have a German scientist who checked and documented it right out. Shame on the government for giving the local councils the power and permission to do that. That is what I am fighting here, right now. Plus, there are the old gold mines that they have just decided to reopen. The cyanide that comes out of the leeching ponds overflows with big rain, it kills our fish, poisons our platypus, dingoes, kangaroos, turtles, and all other animals living in the river. We have been through that already, back in the '80s and '90s. We won the court case then.⁴ It was a sacred frog that saved our river, a golden frog. A very rare species. That is why we are still here today on the River. We have saved our home from poison, but now it is seeping back into our country again through the land. The dump-filled sites. The Environmental Protection Agency are the mob going to get involved next time to support us to stop this disaster going on in our Country. They know there are Aboriginal people on every river. We call it bastardization: trying to poison the people downstream, and take away our sacred trees, carvings and rocks, and push them into rivers and hide them or burn them. This is happening and they tried to hide it, but we know the truth. We have seen the truth; the truth has been passed on to our people from generation to generation live and direct as I speak. Our mystical waterways must be clean and pure for humanity, for the people of many rivers.

This is our Dreaming story, our *Buderim*, here in our Country of Rocky River, *Wonga Beerie Balan*.

The dreaming of our River, it started with a single rain drop. It flowed over the highest mountain, through the deepest valley, to the great deep blue sea, where it washes away the saddest baddest memory on the spirit land. When a wave comes crashing down, it rolls onto the spirit land and washes everything away. When the tides are turning, they are walking and talking, then the tide rolls up onto the shore, the spirit land, and washes away. When the thunder and lightning roll on by, they are singing and dancing. When the thunder rumbles, he is talking, he is singing to you. When the lightning flashes, she is dancing to you. And they roll on by, back to the mountainside where mystical waters ways are created, that washes away the saddest baddest memory that was ever thought of.

Ngayanga Balan noo balan noo, the ancient mystical waterways, that will wash away the pain. So sacred to me and my people. It is the river that will never run dry, it will always flow over the highest mountain and through the deepest value to the deep blue sea. That is one of our creation stories of Rocky River, *Wonga Beerie Balan*, full of colloidal

silver and gold, diamonds, and rubies. It is very rare to find it in a country like ours. The black pearls are ruby diamond. The diamonds here are very pearl like, very rare. A place where I come from is *Djubrun, babra djagun*. Original people of this place, right here now in Country. *Boogle bare, Yoway [thank you, As Spoken by the Creator/Yes]*.

ND: Despite all this violence, you are surviving, you are still here, because of all of your connections with the River. You said it: it is the River that has saved you. How can we, as people on the same Earth, understand that we must change and recognize this interconnectedness? Violence against the Earth provokes so much devastation to humankind, as well as nature. This planet is naturally reacting against our human violence. The waters rising maybe want to wash away all this violence.

UL: We can change the future, prevent the washing away and all this. We can change the future, the people. It is called unity. Everyone comes to a corroboree⁵ and see music and gather, and get thousands of people, with music, people singing and dancing, and speaking about Country, the origine people. We need to create corroborees of all corroborees as we gather. It's CSG: come sing gather.

Ria: instead of Coal Seam Gas.

UL: Come sing and gather. We don't fight, we protect. We nurture our animals in the best way we can. And then it starts from there, from our big gatherings.

And then it starts from the mountains and then it meets halfway. Within ten years we have rainforest again and education kit for the children, outdoor learning, outdoor learning centre, as out in the garden of mother nature. Our children become the teachers of our knowledge.

Ria: – It's your Dreaming stories that saved you, right, Uncle Lewis? Nicoletta explored that connection to nature that can save us. I sit with land and sense stories and feel they will save all of us that live here. I feel they are still meeting us, checking us out, and we are in a question about coming together with the stories. Maybe the stories aren't ready to trust us. Do they trust us? Are they waiting?

UL: I think the trust is there with the stories. That River was always there and trusted a lot of people, people trusted the River too. It is all about how you see the River and how you feel. As you go into the River. Yoway?

Ria: opening the senses to listen. [Yoway] So the listening opens the relationship with the story. [Yoway}

ND: So I understand that it is the listening that enables the trust that is needed. I like this.

UL: Yes, listening to the original people too, of all countries, to give guidance. Yoway, listening, because it hasn't been forgotten. There are many people out there who still have got stories and got belief that we can unite and save many Rivers and the people for the future of our grandchildren.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timbarra_Gold_Mine.

⁵ The Aboriginal totemic dance: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/corroboree>.



I am a grandfather of 13 of my own grandchildren, I live in the bush where they have everything, story, songs, dance and a home, and fresh water to drink for all eternity. Got to think ahead for our babies. The future is in our hands and that is the only way to go forward is to grow our medicines and grow our food, on both sides of the river. It brings unity back to the community.

ND: Your accounts, Uncle Lewis, have just solidified in me the one hope that we must cherish and build on. You origin people are still around and you inhabit the planet with your powerful presence, with your Dreaming stories and sacred laws. You are strong, stronger than the violence and the dominion exercised upon you. Nature, stronger than the human species, stands with you. Nature is on your side.

UL: Trust comes with tribal righteousness under sovereign tribes. Under true honour, is trust. We got to get trust, to get the truth. When we get truth then we get out trust. True honour, right way, with a humble attitude, and share the wisdom. that is how it goes in language: Booglebare.

Conclusion

In our conversation, we dwelled on how humans of any ancestry may ethically begin to enter the laws and knowings of River and explored how to cultivate belonging with, and obligation for, Country, in its largest sense. Through story, we explored the spiritual intentionality of water to teach, to heal and to renew; and that these are offered as gifts to all of life—including humans. As we re-member the true identity of Water, we also recover a sense of our own sacredness, made as we are, almost entirely of water. In filling a gap in the literatures of multi-species justice (Celermajer et al. 2021) and the geographies of co-becoming (Country et al. 2019), together with River we recreate and regenerate law and policy. Ultimately, our conversation joins other streams of ecological jurisprudence—locally and globally—that centre and protect River knowings as necessary for continuing life. In the final moments of revision, Ria notices that River is now dusted with smoke. Although the day is already warm, cultural burning is occurring. Thinning the ground vegetation is among efforts to prepare communities for the bushfires predicted in the long summer ahead.

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