

Tasmanian Aboriginal Freshwater Interests

What are we learning?

December 2022

The Department of Natural Resource and Environment Tasmania (NRE Tas) acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of lutruwita / trowunna (Tasmania) and recognise Tasmanian Aboriginal people's deep and continuing connection to land, sea, waterways, sky and culture. We pay our respects to Elders, past and present, and to the knowledge and cultural practices embedded for all time within Tasmanian Aboriginal ownership of Country. We sincerely thank all Tasmanian Aboriginal people who have provided insight and feedback on freshwater interests; all of whom have survived invasion and dispossession and continue to maintain their identity and culture.

1. Understanding different perspectives around freshwater in Tasmania

As well as underpinning social and economic wellbeing, Aboriginal people's relationship with waters, lands and its resources is crucial to cultural vitality and resilience.

NRE Tas would like to increase our understanding of Tasmanian Aboriginal people's interests and connections to freshwater systems so we can achieve positive and meaningful change. A core value of the new NRE Tas Strategic Plan 2022-2027 is for us to connect, share, learn and actively engage with Tasmanian Aboriginal people and organisations to encourage action and strengthen outcomes for freshwater, the environment and Community.

By starting to meaningfully engage and listen to feedback we receive from Tasmanian Aboriginal people, NRE Tas are beginning to understand and identify key pathways to freshwater access for, as well as the significant barriers to, the use of freshwater by Traditional Custodians.

This is helping NRE Tas to set a clear direction for how we will plan, act, measure and evaluate our progress supporting Tasmanian Aboriginal freshwater interests.

2. Why are we engaging with Tasmanian Aboriginal people and organisations?

NRE Tas recognises we are at the beginning of a learning journey to understand Tasmanian Aboriginal people's interests and connections to freshwater systems.

In December 2021, NRE Tas wrote to 25 Aboriginal organisations inviting each one to meet and share their views on freshwater management and water planning in specific areas of *lutruwita*/Tasmania. We wanted to find out how to best engage and support productive discussions.

Since the letter went out in December last year, NRE Tas has followed up with many of the organisations to determine their level of interest. Overall, feedback has been received from 10 of the 25 Aboriginal organisations and individuals that NRE Tas contacted by letter in December 2021. This included information provided by email, phone conversations and the majority through one-on-one conversations.

Building relationships and improving our engagement with Aboriginal organisations and the wider community is helping to foster trust, knowledge and self-determination across:

- Water policy development
- Water planning
- Cultural and spiritual values
- Aboriginal water rights and access
- Cultural Flows.

The purpose of our engagement is for NRE Tas to understand and build knowledge around:

- How Aboriginal people in Tasmania would like to have input into water projects (e.g. role in water planning processes and decision making)
- Cultural values in relation to freshwater
- The needs of Tasmanian Aboriginal people in terms of water rights and management
- Local water Cultural Flow requirements
- Water policy development including cultural and economic water allocations.

3. How have NRE Tas been engaging?

NRE Tas developed an approach based on discussions with Tasmanian Aboriginal people and organisations. It provides fundamental steps and principles to build relationships and recognise cultural values and knowledge in future management of *lutruwita*/Tasmania's freshwater resources. Our approach recognises that engagement and relationship building with Aboriginal organisations and individuals will provide the foundation for deeper and shared understanding, mutual relationships and benefits. Outlined below are seven principles that we now use to guide how NRE Tas engage in relation to freshwater:

Summary of Guiding Principles for Engagement

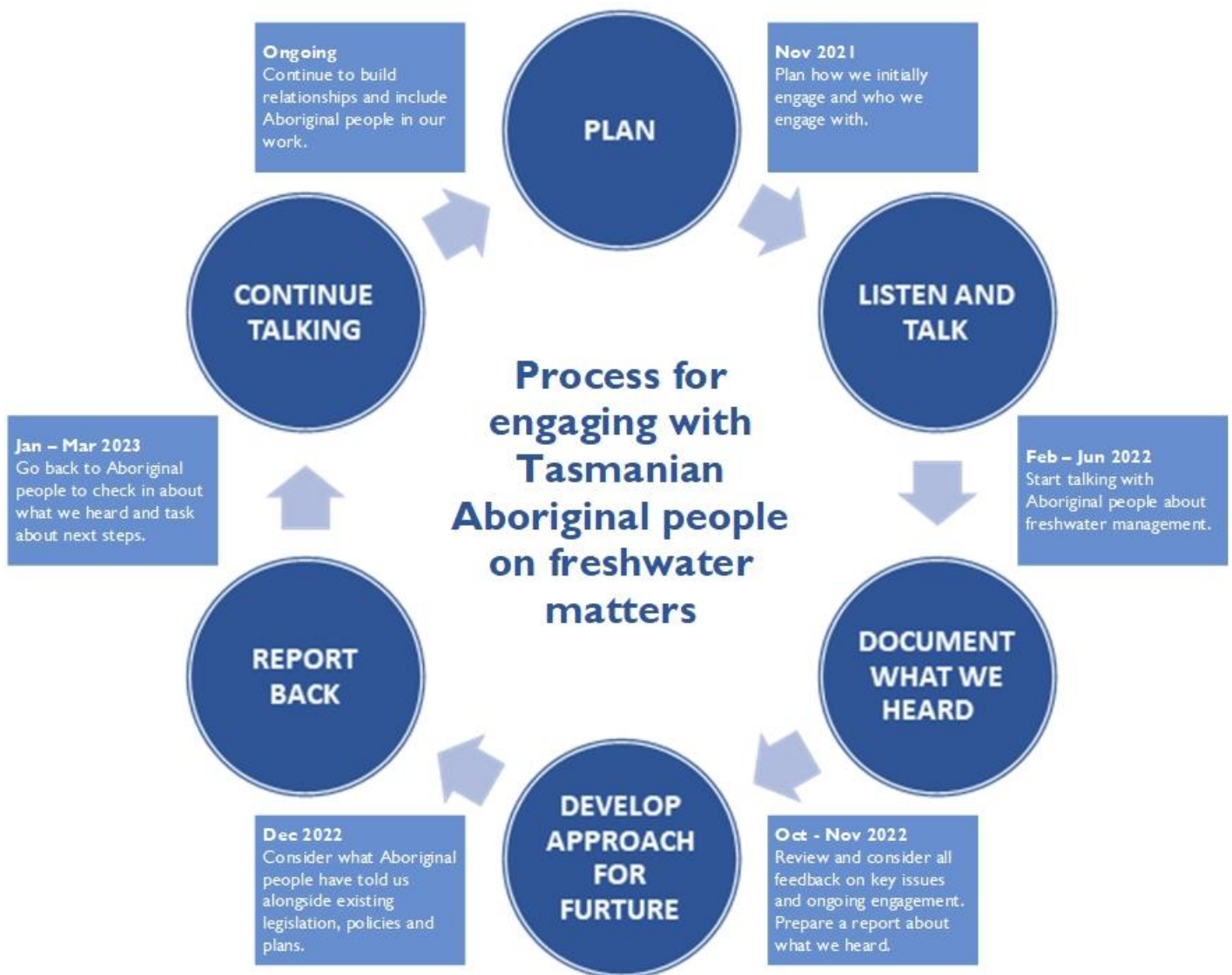
The key guiding principles for engaging with Tasmanian Aboriginal people on Aboriginal freshwater interests are:

1. Acknowledging the diverse interests and perspectives of Tasmanian Aboriginal people.
2. Building relationships through culturally safe, meaningful and ongoing engagement.
3. Engaging early and allowing for plenty of time.
4. Considering different modes of engagement and communication.
5. Gaining cultural understanding and background information first.
6. Using culturally appropriate language and Aboriginal, and dual naming.
7. Respecting cultural knowledge and supporting mutual capacity building for better engagement.

4. What are we learning?

The engagement process NRE Tas are following with Tasmanian Aboriginal people is described in the diagram below and we are currently in the 'Document what we heard' phase, although it is an ongoing process.

There are important messages we have already heard from Tasmanian Aboriginal people that are helping us to build a picture of what freshwater means to them.



The boxes in the diagram reflect what we are doing now in the context of understanding how Tasmanian Aboriginal people would like to have input into water projects.

5. Key points raised in our engagement so far...

[Attachment I](#) is a visual communication of ‘*What We Are Learning?*’

Connection to freshwater and caring for Country

- Freshwater is life. It has sustained Aboriginal people for a very long time. Watercourses were used as key boundaries between Nations and were an important food source for Aboriginal people’s Ancestors on their annual migrations.
- Water quality is a key concern for Tasmanian Aboriginal people. Activities that degrade our water and waterways are of concern. If waterways are sick, then all of Country is sick. Tasmanian Aboriginal people are concerned about human-induced impacts on waterways.
- Freshwater features form a part of Cultural story telling.
- Tasmanian Aboriginal people are very connected to looking after Country and practicing Culture on Country.
- There is concern about the state of the waterways, especially water quality, and the erosion of riverbanks.
- While there is still a lot to learn, some Cultural practices align with environmental needs (e.g., looking after plants and animals, and improving water quality).
- There needs to be equality accessing freshwater.
- Water flows through the land like blood, it gives Country life, without it Country will not thrive.
- Water supports cultural practices such as flows to maintain swan breeding so people can undertake cultural practices such as collecting eggs or hunting swans.

Ownership and decision-making

- Rights were never ceded. Tasmanian Aboriginal people would like recognition and acknowledgement that sovereignty was never ceded.
- Who should hold water rights? – collective rights (Aboriginal Land Council Tasmania model) vs individual organisations.
- Tasmanian Aboriginal people need a seat at the table in water planning and policy discussions but have limited resourcing to be involved. There needs to be adequate resourcing.
- Tasmanian Aboriginal people want to be involved in the decision making on things that affect them.
- One organisation shouldn’t speak for all; regional people should have a say about local issues.
- Tasmanian Aboriginal people are not stakeholders but are rights holders.

Interest in freshwater

- Freshwater is important to Tasmanian Aboriginal people and there is keen interest; however, until recently, it hasn't been at the forefront of people's minds. Freshwater is not thought of as a commodity; freshwater is a part of Country and not separate to it.
- There is strong interest in water for cultural and economic purposes.
- Tasmanian Aboriginal people have interest in water entitlements for economic purposes – e.g. organisations may purchase farms or land-based aquaculture businesses in the future, to provide employment for their people.
- Access to food resources, (e.g. whitebait, crayfish, duck, swan, eel; and clean, fresh water.)
- Concern about low flows in some of the rivers; barriers to water flow and physical access.
- Mainland ideas aren't the same as here – e.g. what a 'cultural' flow is on the mainland may not be relevant in Tasmania.

Engagement

- The people we spoke to appreciate NRE Tas are engaging and are interested in continuing the conversation. Tasmanian Aboriginal people have a fundamental interest in water.
- Interested in being involved in the future and some people are comfortable being part of existing stakeholder groups
- Tasmanian Aboriginal people are largely working in a volunteer capacity and need support to be involved.
- Consultation can't be a 'tick the box' exercise. – there needs to be an end point and clear benefits for Aboriginal people.

Freshwater will continue to be an increasingly important part of Country.

NRE Tas want to ensure Tasmanian Aboriginal people can access the valuable economic, environmental, cultural and spiritual benefits of freshwater directly. As we move forward, NRE Tas will keep listening and working with Tasmanian Aboriginal people to identify and progress tangible benefits to Community that comes from the freshwater that flows across lutruwita.

6. Where to next?

NRE Tas are continuing to learn, talk and work with Tasmanian Aboriginal people about freshwater to build relationships and better understand important issues, cultural values and practices, while discerning community priorities and partnerships. Our future priorities and intentions include developing our freshwater work program more broadly so NRE Tas can continue to:

- Talk with Community to understand views on the Closing the Gap (CtG) Implementation Plan for the Inland Waters Target, which may involve discussions on water rights for Tasmanian Aboriginal people.
- Align our water management and planning work for Aboriginal freshwater interests with any new responsibilities that may arise under a renewed the National Water Initiative (NWI).
- Facilitate more formal engagements so that a state-wide 'Freshwater Forum' can be delivered by Community for Community.
- Address knowledge gaps in our understanding of Tasmanian Aboriginal cultural values in relation to freshwater, and local Cultural water flow requirements.
- Develop and refine water policies including cultural and economic water allocations.

Questions, comments or feedback?

If you would like to get in touch with NRE Tas about Aboriginal freshwater matters, please contact:

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APPENDIX A – Tasmanian Aboriginal organisations/individuals NRE Tas have engaged with since December 2021 and who provided feedback.

1.	Aboriginal Land Council of Tasmania
2.	Brumby Hill Aboriginal Corporation
3.	Circular Head Aboriginal Corporation
4.	Flinders Island Aboriginal Association Incorporated (informal discussion with a member of this group)
5.	Indigenous Tasmanians Aboriginal Corporation
6.	Karadi Aboriginal Corporation
7.	Lia Pootah Aboriginal Corporation
8.	melythina tiakana warrana (Heart of Country) Aboriginal Corporation
9.	Six Rivers Aboriginal Corporation
10.	Tasmanian Aboriginal Corporation (Andry Sculthorpe)