NSW Aboriginal Water Strategy

12-month progress report
October 2026

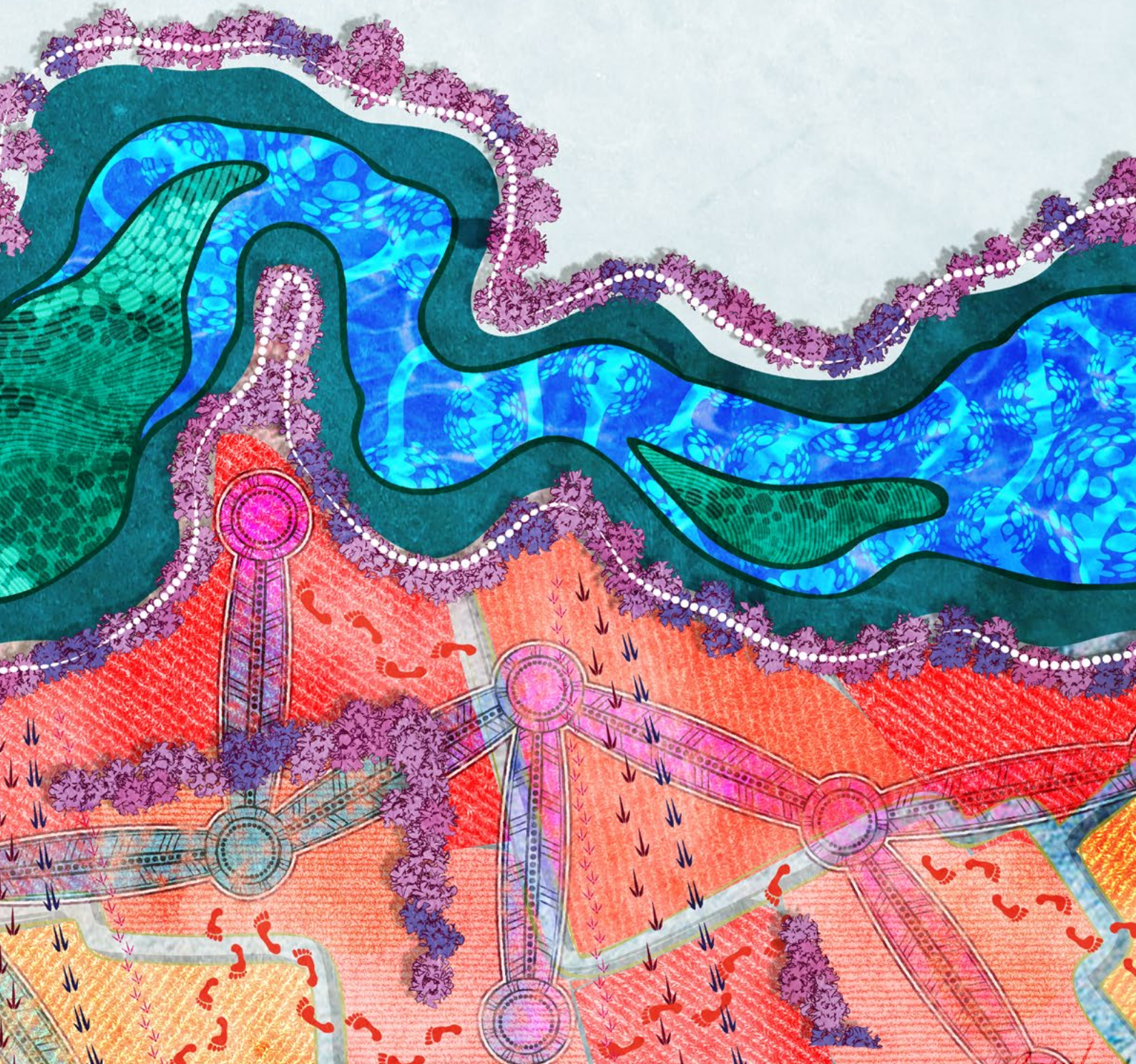

Image credit: Mathew Swan/NSW DCCEEW, McCaughey's Lagoon, Murrumbidgee Valley National Park

NSW Aboriginal Water Strategy – 12-month progress report
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Image: Rekha Sanghi, DCCEEW
Sunrise over Namoi River, Tarriaro

Acknowledgement of Country

The Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (the department) acknowledges the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands, water and sea Country. We pay respect to Elders past and present, and future leaders.

We recognise Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' unique cultural and spiritual relationships to place and their rich contribution to society.

We show our respect through thoughtful and collaborative approaches to our work. We seek to demonstrate our ongoing commitment to providing places where Aboriginal peoples and communities are included socially, culturally and economically to self-determine their own futures.

The artwork

Ghi-dhuray – Connection to the River (Wiradjuri - having river)

The design depicts an aerial view of a river, flanked by farmland. The intent of this piece is to convey how the introduction of farming practices and the land's mistreatment has destroyed many of our cultural practices and connections to the waterways that our people depended on for thousands of years.

It also speaks to the disruption farming has caused to the habits and life cycles of the wildlife which once depended on the waterways also.

The image also tells the story of the shrinking of our waterways from what were once mighty rivers and lakes, now reduced to dry riverbeds and claypans in some places and mere creeks and ponds in others.

It is hoped that people will understand that it has been our responsibility to care for these lands and waterways for generations, and to see them in their current state causes our collective spirits to feel a great sense of shame and sorrow, for we have failed our ancestors.

About the artist

"As a proud Tubba-gah man from Dubbo in the Wiradjuri Nation, I respectfully acknowledge all nations which the department operates on. I acknowledge this artwork will be viewed off my home country of the Tubba-gah people and therefore ask you accept this artwork as an offering on behalf of my family as a gesture of continuing the legacy of the knowledge of our ancestors.

I would also like to pay respect to all traditional custodians of the country whose ancestral lands we all walk upon. I thank the Elders for their wisdom, courage, and sacrifice and pledge my commitment to preserving their legacy for future generations."

– Nathan Peckham

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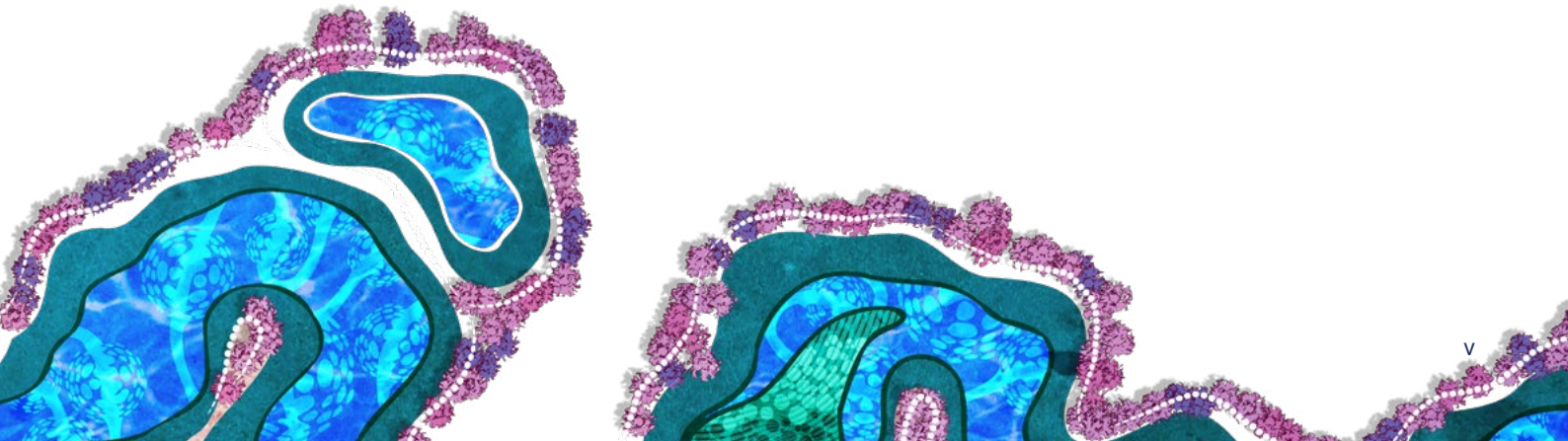


Background

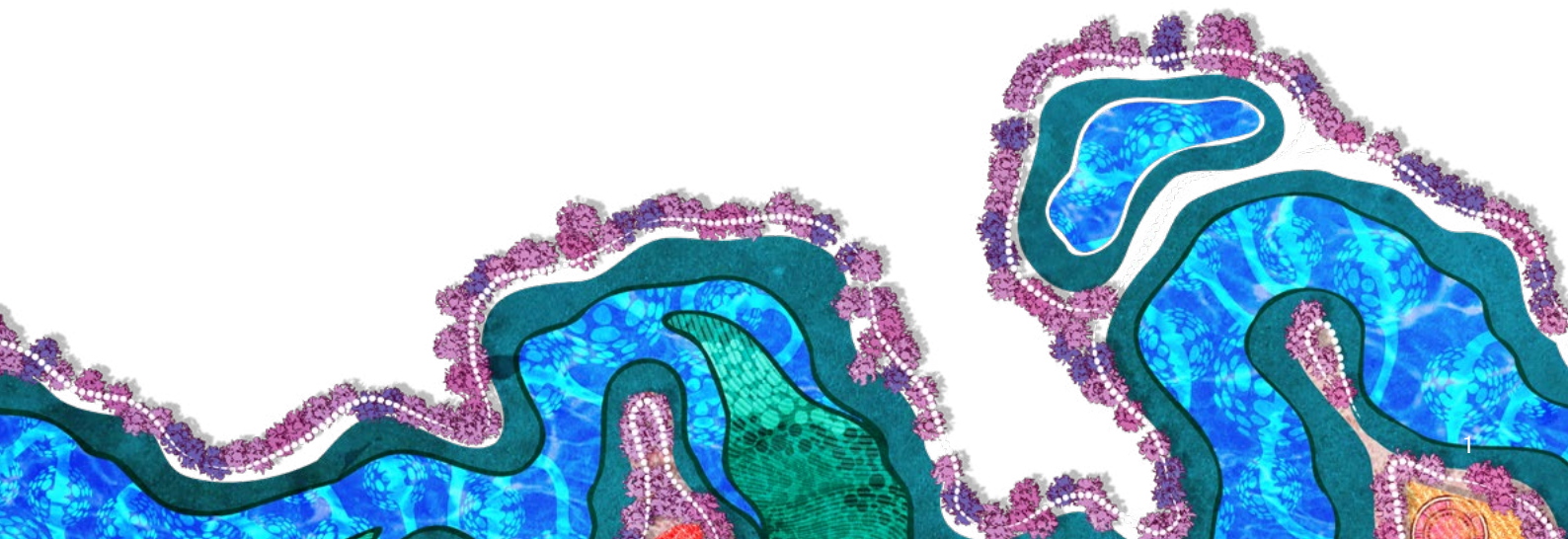
In October 2025, the NSW Department of Climate Change, Energy, Environment and Water (the department) launched the state's first Aboriginal Water Strategy.

The NSW Aboriginal Water Strategy (the strategy) reflects the NSW Government's commitment to working in partnership with Aboriginal peoples to improve access to water, strengthen participation in water management, support culturally informed decision-making and recognise the importance of healthy water systems to culture, wellbeing and connection to Country.

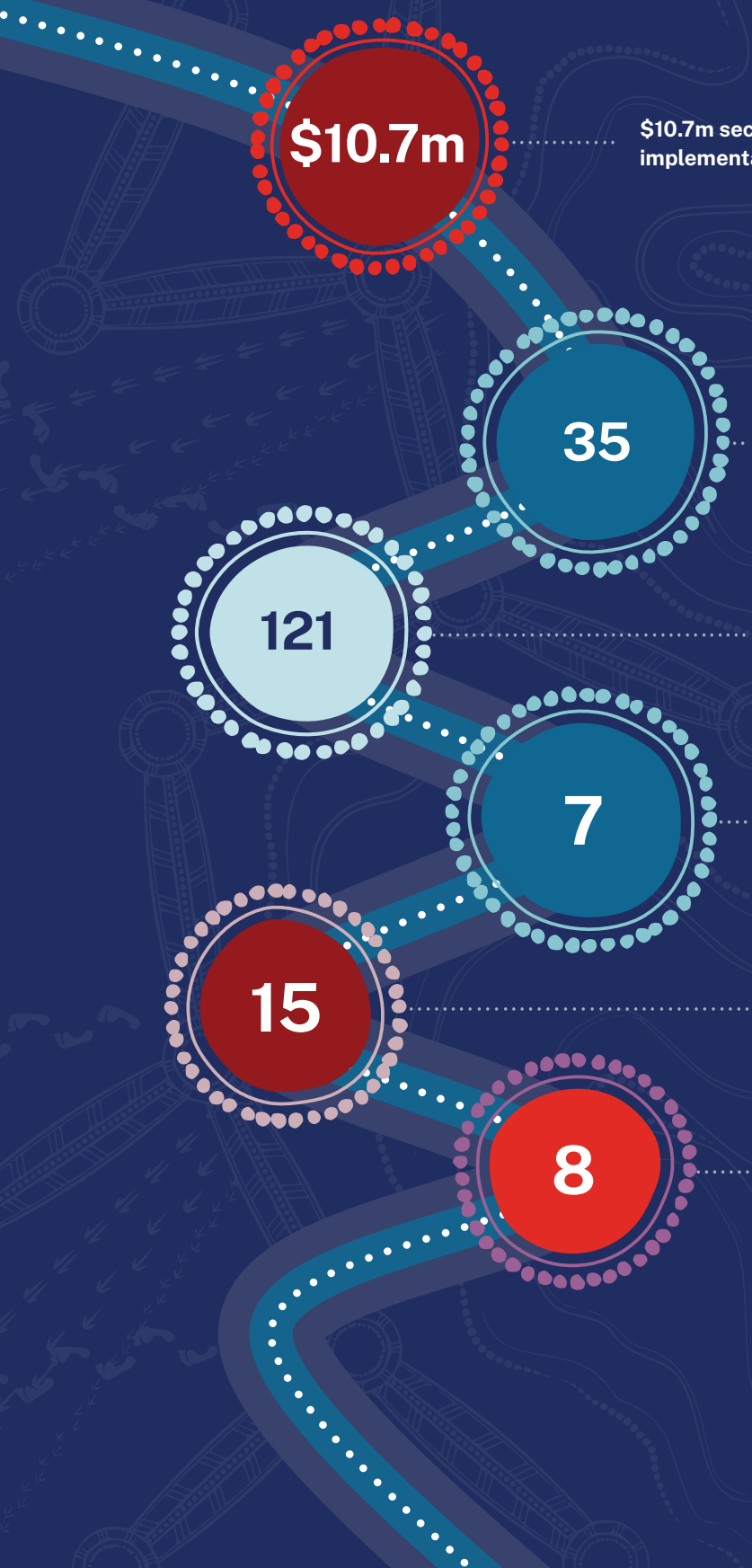
The strategy outlines 26 actions across 4 priorities to improve Aboriginal water outcomes throughout NSW.

The first year of implementation has built strong foundations for long-term reform. Progress has been made through partnerships, policy development, program delivery and engagement with Aboriginal peoples, communities and organisations across NSW.

While many actions represent long-term reform and system change, important progress has been made across all 4 priorities during the first 12 months.



First year achievements at a glance



$10.7m secured to support the first phase of implementation of the NSW Aboriginal Water Strategy

35 Aboriginal organisations to receive more than 130 water access licences

121 Aboriginal cultural water specific purpose access licences granted

7 People supported through a water regulation Aboriginal traineeship program

Cultural values monitoring commenced at 15 locations along the Murrumbidgee River

8 people employed in local water utilities through an Aboriginal pathways to water operation program

PRIORITY 1

Increase Aboriginal peoples' access to and ownership of water to support cultural, social, economic and intergenerational outcomes

What we've achieved together

Efforts to increase Aboriginal control of water and establish foundations for future reform made significant progress.

Outcomes included:

- progressing a NSW Inland Waters Target Framework with Aboriginal partner agencies
- making surrendered and government-held water access licence shares available for transfer to Aboriginal-controlled organisations
- identifying public works that improve access to waterways, wetlands and to benefit from higher environmental water deliveries
- continuing efforts to reduce barriers to accessing Aboriginal cultural water specific purpose access licences.

Work also continued to expand opportunities for Aboriginal peoples to participate in water management and pursue cultural, social, environmental and economic benefits through greater access to and ownership of water.

Together, these initiatives support greater self-determination and contribute to broader efforts to improve opportunities and outcomes for Aboriginal communities.

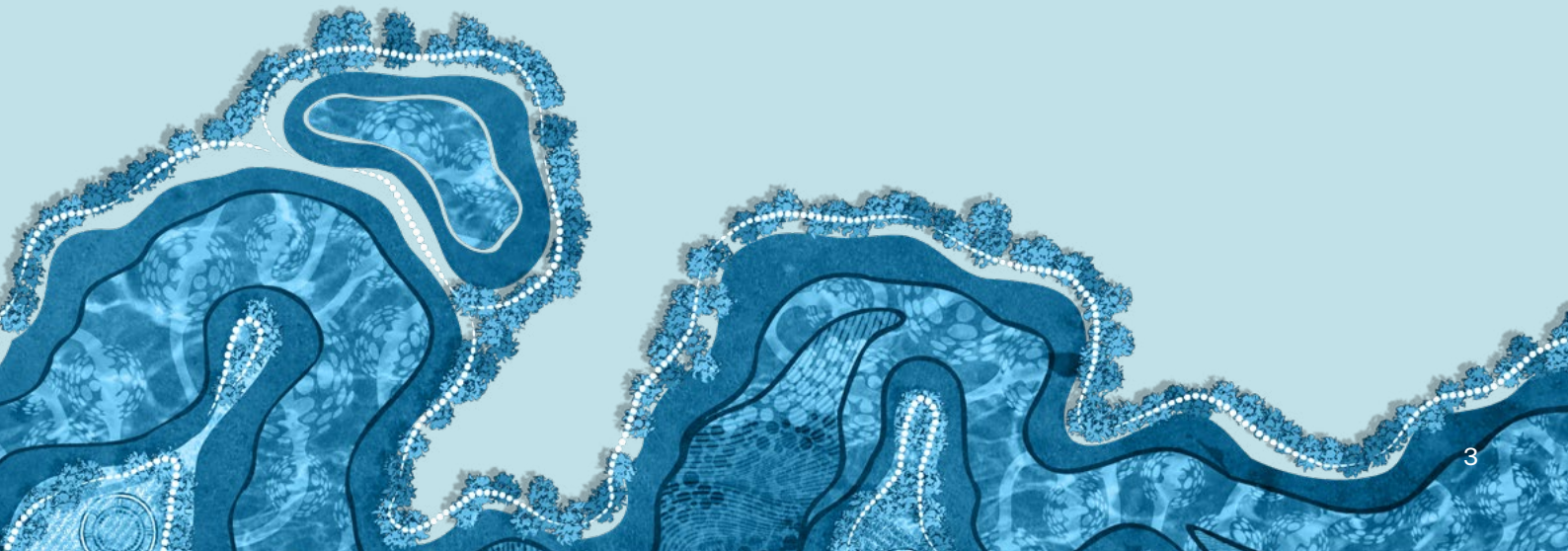


Image credit: Robert Cleary/NSW DCCEEW, Kings Plains National Park, Ironbark Creek Campground

CASE STUDY

Returning water to support Aboriginal communities

Around 130 water licences will likely be transferred to approximately 35 Aboriginal organisations in a first-of-its-kind process. This followed a registration of interest process, making available more than 26,000 surrendered, government-held water licence shares across 236 water sources, for transfer to eligible Aboriginal controlled organisations in NSW. Final offers of water access licences, totalling 13,500 shares, were made to 48 Aboriginal legal entities, creating new opportunities for Aboriginal organisations to own licences for the take of water.

Before final offers were made, organisations were offered tailored information from water specialists. The department held 42 separate meetings with representatives of 39 Aboriginal organisations to support their understanding of water rights available to them and how these rights could support their community priorities and aspirations. The meetings also provided the opportunity to increase understanding of the rules and role of water sharing plans and promote greater engagement by Aboriginal people in the processes of water sharing plan reviews and replacements.

Access to water supports a range of cultural, social, environmental and economic outcomes and creates new opportunities for Aboriginal communities to strengthen their connection to water and Country and future generations.

"This is an agenda that NSWALC has been pushing for many years now with Government and it's great to see that these licenses are now becoming available... The opportunity presented through this Registration of Interest process will be the beginning of healing for many of our people by having access to water"

Councillor Ross Hampton, NSW Aboriginal Land Council

PRIORITY 1

1 Increase Aboriginal peoples' access to and ownership of water to support cultural, social, economic and intergenerational outcomes

Action	Status
Develop a NSW Closing the Gap water target in collaboration with Aboriginal peak organisations and informed by broader engagement.	On track
Make unassigned water and water from surrendered licences available for Aboriginal use and control and explore further mechanisms to increased Aboriginal ownership of water including for economic purposes.	On track
Minimise or remove administrative barriers to Aboriginal cultural specific purpose access licences, including waiving fees, simplifying application processes to ensure it is accessible, culturally appropriate, and fit for purpose.	On track
Support Aboriginal peoples and entities in understanding requirements for works approvals and licences to extract, use and manage water for a range of purposes.	Progressing
Support Aboriginal peoples to develop water plans that reflect their goals and work across government to remove barriers and help communities access, own, and use water.	Planned
Work with Aboriginal peoples, landholders and agencies to find ways to improve access to waterways and other culturally significant water dependent sites.	Progressing
Identify opportunities to leverage the Australian Government's Land and Water Partnership program to achieve Aboriginal and environment outcomes.	Progressing
Work with Traditional Owners to improve the recognition and exercise of native title rights in water management.	Progressing

Status key Completed · On track · Progressing · Planned

PRIORITY 2

Strengthen the role of Aboriginal peoples in water management through representation, engagement and respectful partnerships

What we've achieved together

Work to strengthen the role of Aboriginal peoples in water management through representation, engagement and respectful partnerships continued during the first year of implementation.

Outcomes included:

- continuing engagement with Aboriginal communities, organisations and partners on water management discussions
- ensuring Aboriginal voices, knowledges and priorities informed policy and program development
- working with partners to explore opportunities for increased Aboriginal participation in water governance and management.

This work contributes to the department's broader commitment to shared decision-making, respectful partnerships and ensuring Aboriginal perspectives continue to inform the management of water and Country.

It also supports ongoing efforts to strengthen Aboriginal participation in water governance and improve outcomes for communities and future generations.

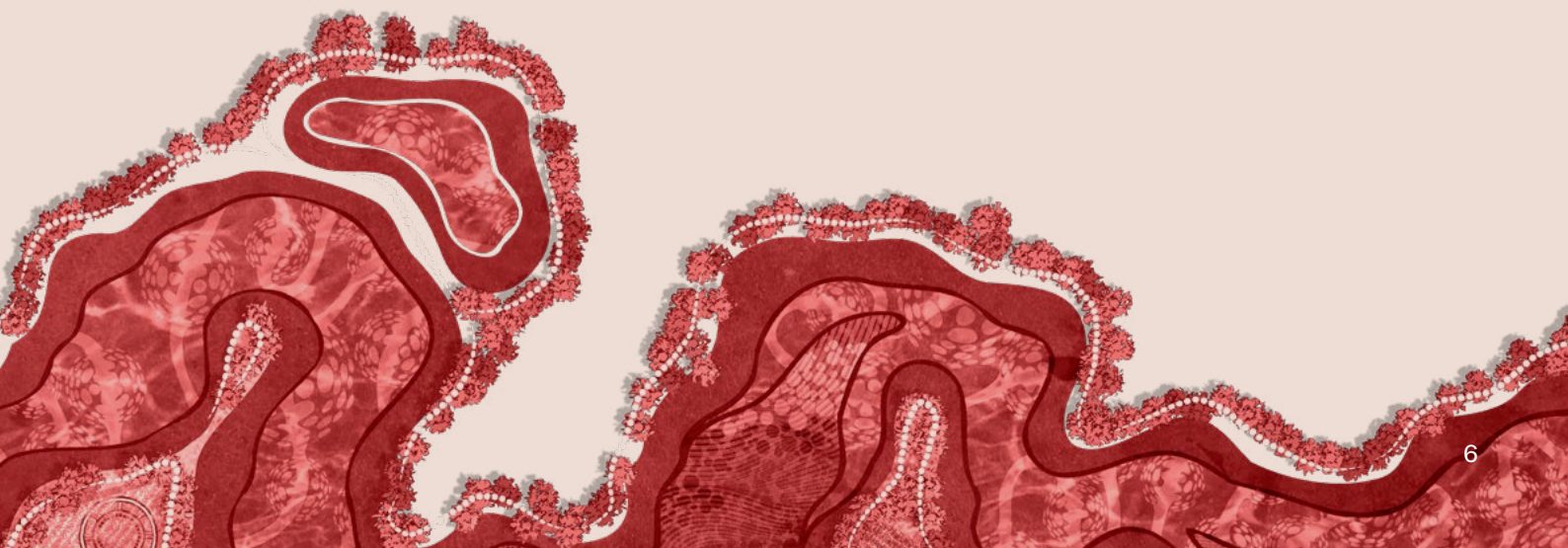


Image credit: Adam Hollingworth/NSW DCCEEW, Bongil Bongil excursion with primary students

CASE STUDY

Shared responsibility, stronger outcomes

The department's first Aboriginal Outcomes Strategy was launched during NAIDOC Week 2026, providing an important foundation for strengthening Aboriginal participation, partnerships and shared decision-making across the department and supporting ongoing efforts to increase Aboriginal involvement in water management.

It will ensure Aboriginal peoples, organisations and communities have a clear and consistent role in shaping the decisions, policies, programs and investments that affect Country and community.

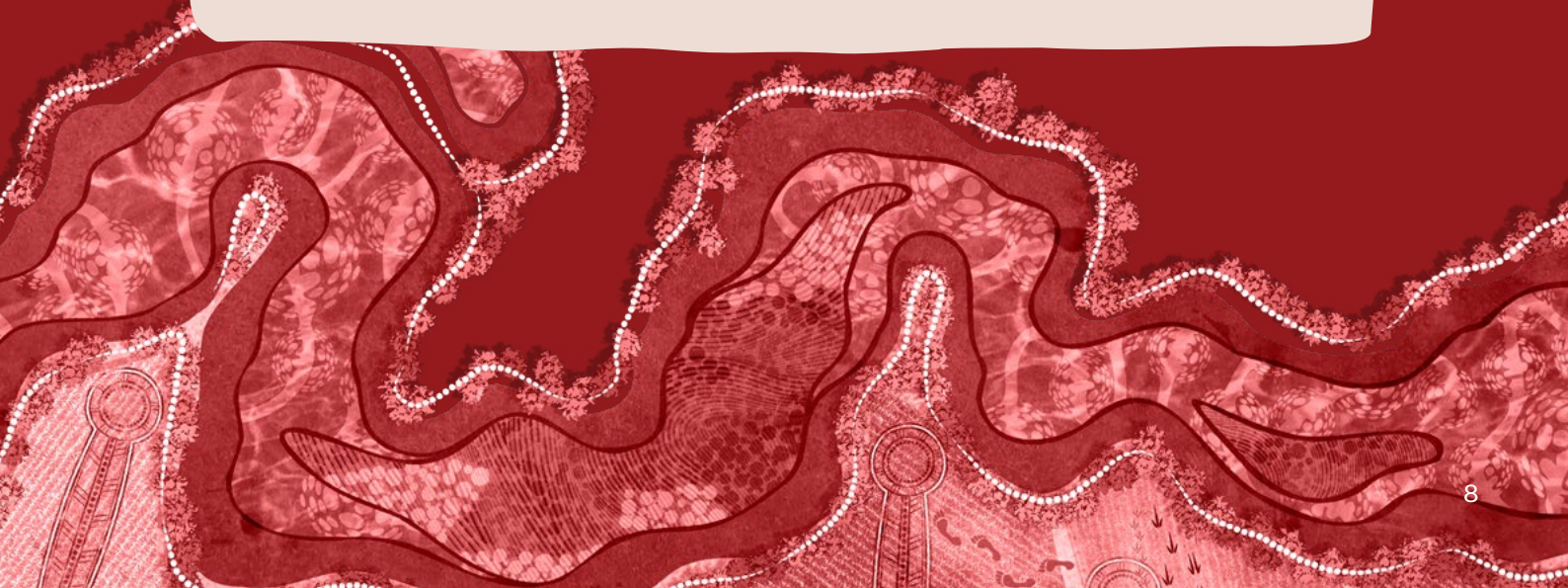
This will be achieved through developing strong partnerships, place-based engagement, supporting cultural authority and creating more meaningful opportunities for Aboriginal peoples to participate in decisions that affect them.

PRIORITY 2

2 Strengthen the role of Aboriginal peoples in water management through representation, engagement and respectful partnerships

Action	Status
Recommend governance arrangements for Aboriginal water ownership and management to help carry out a NSW Closing the Gap water target.	Progressing
Explore with NSW Regional Aboriginal Water Committee members how future engagement and collaboration can most effectively involve Aboriginal peoples in water management decisions.	Progressing
Develop a plan to improve renumeration and travel support for Aboriginal peoples to enable meaningful involvement in water management.	Progressing
Continue work with the Gomeroi Nation on a pathway to finalise the remaining Water Resource Plans that are pending re-submission to the Australian Government.	Progressing
Improve opportunities and capacity for NSW Aboriginal peaks and community-controlled organisations to inform water policy and program design.	On track
Continue to work with Aboriginal peoples in decision making about management of environmental water, including through the department's Environmental Water Advisory Groups.	On track

Status key Completed · On track · Progressing · Planned



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PRIORITY 3

Respect, recognise and embed Aboriginal knowledge to care for Country and support culturally informed water management

What we've achieved together

Ensuring Aboriginal knowledges, perspectives and cultural values are recognised and incorporated into water management was progressed.

Outcomes included:

- strengthening the protection and governance of Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property
- reviewing information materials about water to make them easier to understand
- supporting capacity-building initiatives that deepen community understanding of water management
- developing water literacy initiatives linked to environmental water management

This work contributes to the department's broader commitment to embedding Aboriginal knowledges and culturally informed approaches across policy, program delivery and decision-making.

It also supports efforts to strengthen cultural capability, respect Indigenous data sovereignty and ensure Aboriginal perspectives continue to inform the management of water and Country.

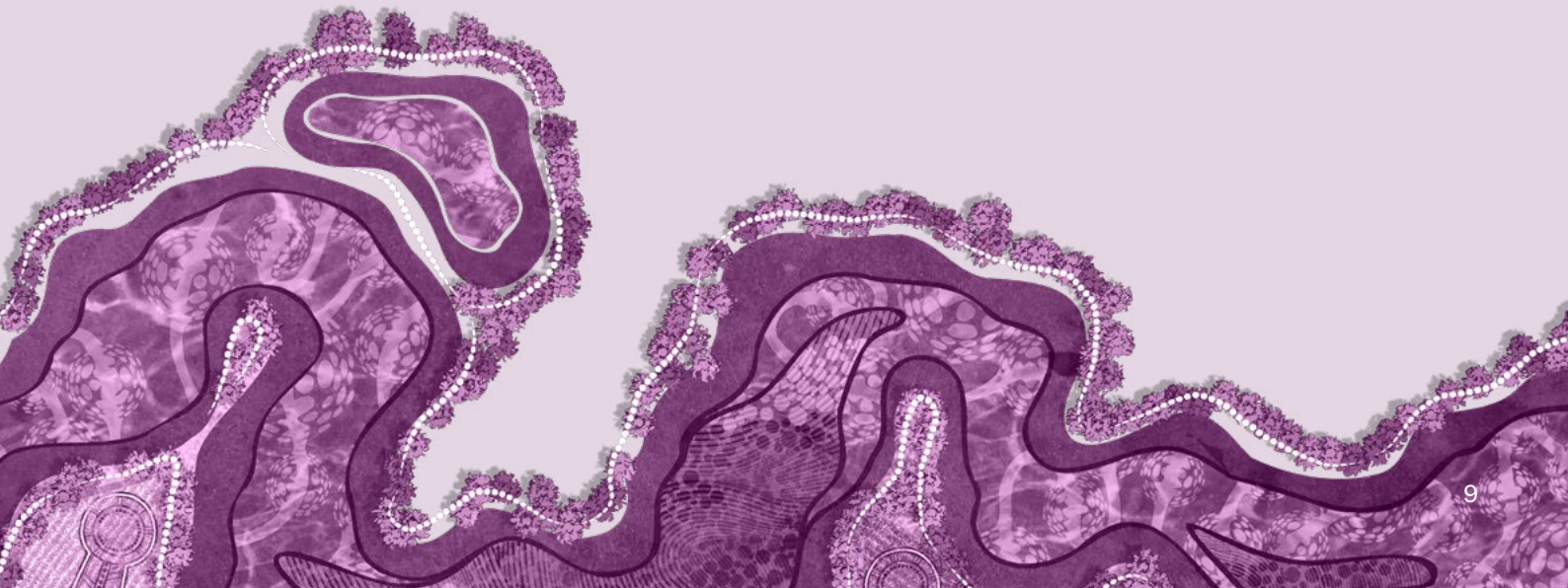

Image credit: Wayne Wilson/NSW DCCEEW, Trainees working with a simulation of a home water meter

CASE STUDY

Building pathways into the water sector

A pilot program in Shoalhaven, NSW created culturally safe career pathways for Aboriginal peoples, resulted in a 100% completion rate and 8 trainees being employed by Shoalhaven Water.

Designed and delivered in partnership with Aboriginal Affairs NSW, NSW Department of Education -Training Services, NSW Water Directorate, Shoalhaven Water, the NSW Office of Local Government and Fusion Training Solutions, the pilot focused on increasing Aboriginal employment opportunities and helping local water utilities address workforce shortages.

Over 2 weeks in April 2026, 10 people participated in the Aboriginal Pathways Fresh Start into Water Operations course, learning about industry roles, water sampling and testing, and workplace health and safety, developing practical skills, confidence and a clearer understanding of career opportunities in the water sector.

On completion of the course, 8 participants commenced a 2-year traineeship, after which they will have a Certificate III in Water Industry Operations - a nationally accredited qualification.

Supervisors of the new recruits receive cultural capability uplift training, further strengthening each trainee's opportunity for long-term success.

The positive outcomes of the pilot have resulted in it being replicated in other regions, with 10 participants completing the course in Port Macquarie in September 2026.

Traineeships are currently being advertised in the 3 participating local water utilities - Port Macquarie Hastings Council, MidCoast Council and Kempsey Shire Council.

PRIORITY 3

3 Respect, recognise and embed Aboriginal knowledge to care for Country and support culturally informed water management

Action	Status
Continue to support Closing the Gap commitments and work with other agencies to provide data to Aboriginal organisations. This will be in formats that support local and shared decision making while respecting ICIP and data sovereignty.	Progressing
Develop culturally appropriate materials and guides to improve understanding of complex water management topics including rules, policies and processes.	On track
Deliver capacity building and water literacy training for future environmental water releases under the Reconnecting River Country Program Murrumbidgee Project.	On track
Provide NSW input to Australian Government materials to support the Murray Darling Basin Plan review so that the materials accurately and appropriately inform Aboriginal communities in NSW about NSW water licensing and approval rules and processes.	Progressing
Support cultural science and joint management programs, such as fish and wetland monitoring in the Lachlan and Murrumbidgee catchment, to enable two-way knowledge exchange and support Nations to lead or co-design monitoring and evaluation efforts.	On track
Set up a records and information management framework system that respects and promotes Indigenous data sovereignty and ensures control of ICIP.	Progressing

Status key Completed · On track · Progressing · Planned

Image credit: Mathew Swan/NSW DCCEEW, Murrumbidgee Valley National Park -McCaughey's Lagoon

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PRIORITY 4

Recognise and support the importance of healthy water systems to Aboriginal wellbeing, culture and connection to Country

What we've achieved together

Work to support recognition of healthy waterways and its importance to Aboriginal culture, wellbeing and connection to Country led to outcomes including:

- commencing cultural values monitoring under the Reconnecting River Country Program Murrumbidgee Project and supporting improved understanding of cultural outcomes associated with river and floodplain management.
- progressing water and sewerage services to eligible Aboriginal communities across NSW under the Aboriginal Communities Water and Sewerage Program

These activities contributed to healthier waterways, stronger communities and improved recognition of Aboriginal cultural values in water management. They also supported the department's broader commitment to accountability, transparency and continuous improvement in Aboriginal outcomes.

Image credit: NSW DCCEEW Murrin Bridge Adnate Juddy-Roller Community Art Project

Image credit: Mathew Swan, Yarning circle, Koori Beach, Murrumbidgee River, Narrandera

CASE STUDY

Monitoring cultural values on Country

Through the Reconnecting River Country Program Murrumbidgee Project, on-Country cultural values monitoring by Aboriginal peoples was undertaken across 15 co-designed locations in Balranald, Narrandera and Gundagai.

The monitoring program creates opportunities for Aboriginal peoples to spend time on Country and contribute their knowledge, perspectives and priorities to the management of rivers, floodplains and culturally significant places.

Through a co-designed approach, the Reconnecting River Country Program can integrate traditional knowledge and modern practices to create more meaningful and effective outcomes

It also builds a stronger understanding of cultural outcomes associated with environmental water management and provides an important foundation for future decision-making.

The work recognises that healthy water systems support not only environmental outcomes but also culture, connection, knowledge sharing and the ongoing care of Country.

The Reconnecting River Country Program Murrumbidgee Project's First Nations Enabling Measures focus on activities that empower communities to participate in environmental water planning, delivery and monitoring and continue to strengthen connection to Country, support cultural heritage outcomes and embed Traditional Owner knowledge in environmental water planning and delivery.

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PRIORITY 4

Recognise and support the importance of healthy water systems to Aboriginal wellbeing, culture and connection to Country

Action	Status
Develop ways to monitor and evaluate delivery of Aboriginal cultural objectives in Water Sharing Plans.	Planned
Improve transparency about how water management decisions involve consideration of principles in the *Water Management Act 2000*, including protecting features significant to Aboriginal peoples.	Planned
Identify any legislative changes that could strengthen Aboriginal water rights and protect cultural values (both tangible and intangible), including responding to impacts where harm may be demonstrated, through restorative action.	Progressing
Establish a cultural values monitoring program for the Reconnecting River Country Program for sites benefited or impacted by relaxed constraints environmental water releases.	On track
Deliver the Aboriginal Communities Water and Sewerage Program to support the operation, maintenance and upgrade of water and sewerage services at over 60 eligible Aboriginal communities.	On track
Work together with Aboriginal peoples to identify important water sites and take the necessary steps to protect and manage them, respecting cultural knowledge and rights	Progressing

Status key Completed · On track · Progressing · Planned

Image credit: Greg Wallace/NSW DCCEEW, Mosaic, The Pines picnic area, Yarriabini National Park

Working together for future generations

In its first year of implementation, the NSW Aboriginal Water Strategy has centred on building stronger partnerships, progressing reform and establishing foundations for lasting change.

Ongoing work across the 4 priorities will continue to increase Aboriginal access to and ownership of water, strengthen participation in water management, recognise and embed Aboriginal knowledges and support healthy water systems and communities.

This progress will be driven by partnership, shared responsibility and a clear commitment to improving Aboriginal water outcomes across NSW.

The NSW Aboriginal Water Strategy remains a key contribution to the department's broader commitment to strengthening Aboriginal outcomes and ensuring Aboriginal voices, knowledges and priorities help shape the future management of water and Country.

NSW GOVERNMENT

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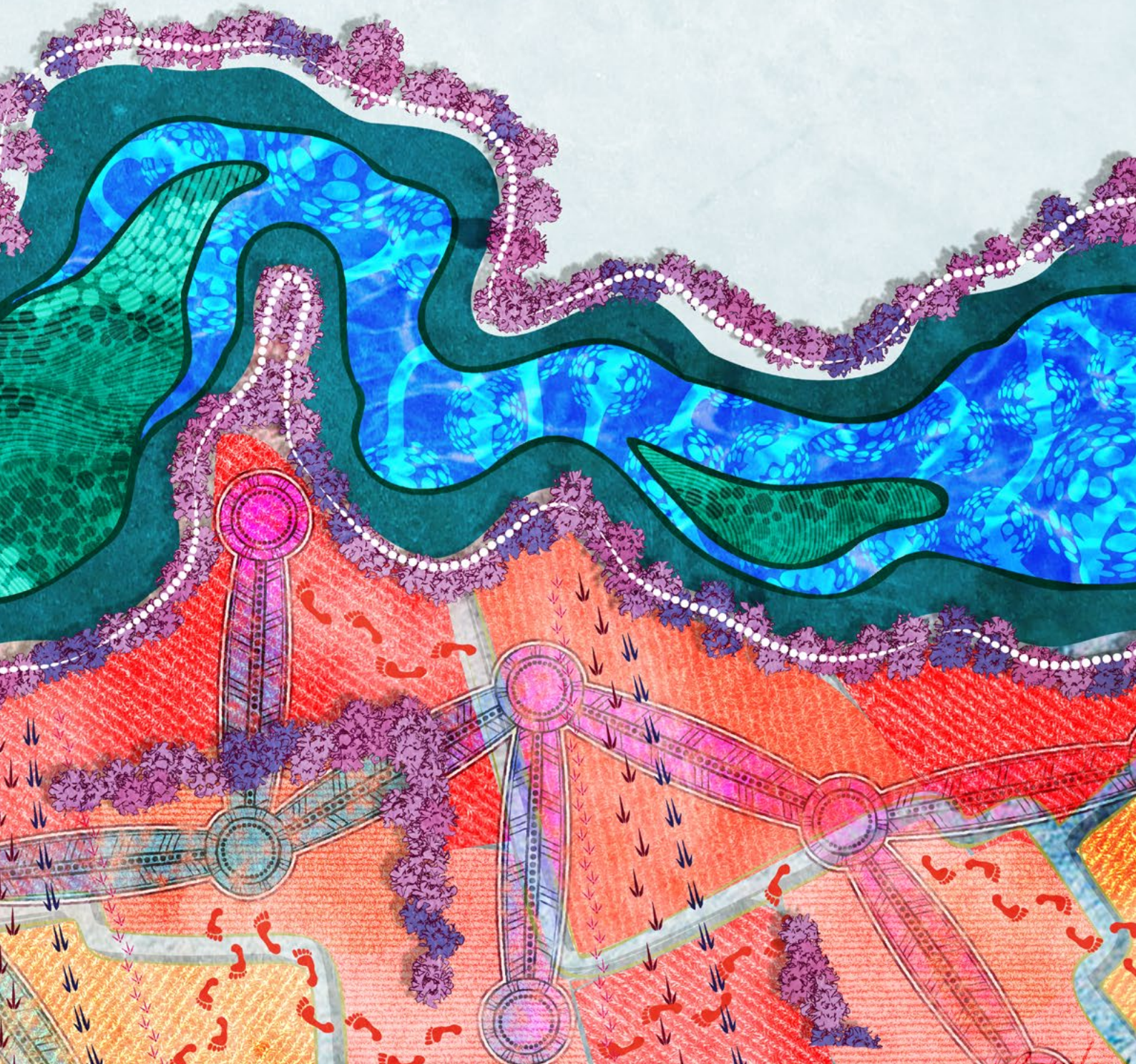
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