Polly Cutmore, Moree

Polly Cutmore is Kamilaroi/Gomeroi woman and Traditional Owner from Moree in northern New South Wales. Her country includes the Mehi River that flows through town and joins the Gwydir River and the wetlands system to the south.

A community activist since the 1970s, Polly became a Native Title Applicant in 2016 She joined the Gwydir Engagement Committee in about 2019. Polly is currently involved with the Commonwealth Aboriginal water buy-back program, the Boobera Lagoon Crown Land Committee, the NSW Gwydir First Nations Environmental Water Group and a member of the MDBA Aboriginal Water Entitlements Program Advisory Goup

Country

The river is a part of life, of the Mehi, Moree and of the northwest. If it wasn’t for the river no one would be here. My mum and I were both born in the Aboriginal section of the Moree Hospital over there on the riverbank of the Mehi and lived in the Mission near the Mehi.

One of my favourite spots is a park on the Mehi River near the Returned Services Club. This was once a big meeting place for my people with plenty of shade and water and good fishing. There’s ducks and bats so we had food constantly. In times of famine and drought, it would have been a permanent spot for us to come and live and survive. It’s always got water in it.

When I was growing up in the 1970s the Mehi was flowing, it was a little bit higher than it is now and a lot clearer. There were plenty of birds, fish and food. At least every week someone was having fish, yellow belly from the river. We’d come down to the river and have a swim on a hot day and just muck around, being cool on the river, just splashing and sitting by the river in the shade after playing basketball on the other side of the river.

Water leadership

When I was a little girl growing up on the Aboriginal Mission, the river was everything to us. At the Mission school we had classes at the riverbank. After school the river was our playground. There was the spot where we sat down when it was hot. We’d lay on the bank and look down the river, the little fish and leeches, just watch what was going on because it was clear. It was our television. It was an extension of our home, the river. There would be still parts of the river that were deep enough to swim in. It was food, we’d go craw bobbing (yabby fishing).

We’d go fishing with my grandmother. She’d teach us stuff, especially where we could go and where we couldn’t. We’d sit on the riverbank and watch what’s in the water. She’d be teaching you: “don’t go in there, you don’t know what’s there”, “look what’s in there” and “see what’s going on”. When she’d fish, we’d help. She’d teach us to measure fish, throw it back if it was small and what parts of the fish we could eat. We’d cook at the river and caught what we ate.

Grandparents were the cultural teachers. Mums are always busy with lots of other children. I was very fortunate. I had both my grandmothers and my great grandmother, Granny Daisy there. I took my nephews and nieces fishing when they were small. We’d sit there fishing and having a great time. They renamed me Walgan Giiray (Auntie Crawbob).

When I was at school, around 1967, there was a pump put in our river across from the mission. We didn’t know what it was, that it sucked stuff out. We were playing in the river and we heard this horrible noise. A pump sucked up one of my school friends who lost his life. That is my first memory of irrigation. It changes everything on the river because the river is not safe anymore.

Changes

Now the river is overgrown, full of weeds. There’s a jetty at the park where you’re supposed to be able to walk out but you can’t. It’s dangerous and people would get lost in the weeds there. The land has been cleared and is trying to look more like a European settlement. It has rich houses for prestige so that they can say they live on the river.

The kids swim when it’s hot. There’s little selective places for swimming but they have to be very careful because of the pollution in the water. Everything gets dumped in it. On the Gwydir there’s a place of 15 kilometres of built-up rubbish, a raft with fridges, washing machines, land clearing — everything and anything! We have to come up with some solution because water can’t get through. In the 1960s the navy or the army put a bomb in it, and they blew it up. It’s unbelievable what they did. I said we can’t do that again.

We are suffering at the hands of mistakes that colonisers have made. Our people told them they can’t build on flood plains and they wouldn’t listen. They still won’t listen and they continue to try to divert our rivers and stop water coming. They’ll look pretty silly when they have to pack up their towns and go.

Roles as a water leader

From the 1970s I was always involved in health and welfare because they were our major issues, and in sports. Committees are my thing to help trying to bring my people together and so we can prosper and enjoy life too, because we have every right to.

I returned to Moree in 2016 and joined the Native Title committee. My mother told me that I had to be respectful. Respect the lore and make sure you don’t go away signing away country that doesn’t belong to you. I can speak for myself but I don’t know everything about this river. Don’t go giving it away without talking to everyone to see who it is going to affect. Make sure I didn’t disgrace my family. I had to let my community know what was happening because it’s Aboriginal lore.

That’s my role and I speak for community. Some of my people are fearful, how they’ve treated us, disrespected us and laughed at us and our knowledge. I lost my parents and so I’m the head of the family now. I have to stand up and make sure my family survives, that everyone survives. I have to take that fight as far as I can go because it’s no fault of my people. It’s colonisation that’s happened in everything that we do. We’ve got a lot of healing to do, but we know how to protect this country, how it’s supposed to be, how it’s supposed to flow, how it’s supposed to be connected and how we’re connected to it. If we’re happy so is our river.

My mob were talking about all this stuff to me: “Oh these people! They just don’t know when to stop with their irrigation”. We started seeing irrigators getting a little bit cocky and bigger in this town. Since cotton and the irrigators, our town and our community has suffered severely. Around 2019 I got elected to the Gwydir Engagement Committee that was bringing people together around the northwest from the Namoi to the Gwydir. I didn’t like what was going on and how they were treating us as though we didn’t know what we were doing and they were the experts. Come on! They haven’t been doing this here for thousands of years, we have.

Concerns and hopes

When I came back to Moree I’d seen the sadness in my mob’s eyes, especially on the river. I was able to walk across the river under the bridge in Moree. There was no water whatsoever. You could see the life being sucked out of the river and my people. We’ve had major sorry business. I don’t know if we’ve tried to fill the river up with our tears, but we could. It started to frighten us and then we released this is connected.

I’d seen the big fish kills at Menindee. I’d seen my people in Walgett fighting for water for the river which was heartbreaking. How come my mob down that end have no water and then we had water up here? Then I find out that water is getting diverted in different spots. They weren’t telling us where this water was going and how many dams we’ve got. The ducks were dying. They washed dirty coal with lovely clean water which becomes toxic and is put back in our reservoir and our riverway and sent down the river to my people.

I started seeing trucks filling up with water off the river and thinking that can’t be right. They diverted roads and made their own illegal levy banks that changes water flow. Then I find out that they started trading water. I can’t believe the disgusting behaviour of the government, farmers, irrigators and of all the corporations including mining, and what they’ve done to our country. There’s more despair and anger in the community but there’s anger in the water at what’s going on.

The irrigators have been running around here trying to get black fellas on their committees, to get us thinking they’re the good guys and they’re here to help us. They’re here to help themselves. We don’t benefit from the industries. It hasn’t given us employment, except a couple of casual jobs. We don’t want little token jobs. They want the water rights and they don’t own water. No one owns water. Water belongs to everyone. It belongs to the land and the animals first. The government is turning a blind eye to their theft. We want our water back and better regulation.

There’s been some improvements. There’s Booboora Lagoon, the Gwydir Engagement Committee that I’m still a part of here, and they’ve got the river program in Moree. Lots of different stuff has been highlighted with our river which is wonderful. Now what we need to do is clean it and bring clean water back.

If the Murray-Darling Basin Authority wants to work with First Nations communities, they need to talk to us first and make sure that our message and voice is heard. We need our voice, knowledge, experience, culture and lore brought back to make sure that life is given back to the land, water, country, animals, and our people so everything thrives. We’re not living with each other like we were before. I think the best thing is to exchange information and knowledge that we have and that they have brought, and let’s start working to make this a better place and make sure that we use the resources to make sure that they’re here for future generations. Let’s look after it and use it better. If we came together, instead of having this wall up, and just sit down and listen we may be able to protect our country and our resources for all our kids, for the future.

When the river’s flowing, the fish are flowing and you can smell the yellow belly. It’s one of the best times. You can smell the life. You can see the life, the food and it connects us to everything. It connects us to stories sitting with our mothers. There’s times when you just sit there for peace and healing, you know. And it’s a part of survival too, just as much as the nourishment that feeds us inside our body.