

# The Martuwarra (Fitzroy River)

The Martuwarra (Fitzroy River) is in the northwestern corner of Western Australia. River flows vary significantly due to annual flooding.



Flooding causes large floodplain wetlands, small seasonal wetlands, permanent pools and billabongs. Floods flush the deep permanent pools of the main channel and water spreads across the plains, creating billabongs and anabranching (a diverging branch of a river that re-enters the main stream channels or which loses itself in sandy soil) and renewing groundwater aquifers.

## The Martuwarra

Since the beginning of time when Woonyoomboo (the first Nyikina man) speared Yoongoorrookoo (the rainbow serpent) and created the Martuwarra, the river has continued to be a sacred living ancestral being in First Law. First Law continues to provide Traditional Owners with a framework for their united approach to catchment management and governance.

Two traditional First Laws – Warloongarri and Wunan, are ancient laws for a holistic approach to water stewardship and regional governance that continues to be shared and respected by the First Nations within the catchment.

“Since Bookarrakarra (the beginning of time), these First Laws ensured the health of the living system of the Mardoowarra [also known as the Martuwarra or Fitzroy River]”. These laws are founded on the principle that the priority of law is to protect and manage the sustainable harmony of the land over the self-interests of humans. First Laws are framed around values and ethics of co-management and co-existence” (Pelina 2019).

The Martuwarra Fitzroy River Council (MFRC) is an entirely First Nations-led organisation. It is guided by a diverse representation of senior Elders with cultural authority and knowledge holders on the front line, who defend against the destruction of cultural heritage, ecological damage, poverty and climate change. MFRC's vision is to ensure Martuwarra, a living ancestor and a global treasure, retains a right to live and flow. The Council considers Martuwarra as communal property, an ‘asset in the commons’ that belongs to all of us. The River must be protected for the benefit of all present and future generations.



## Gooniyandi Seasons Calendar (Mingayooroo – Manyi Waranggiri Yarrangi)

Gooniyandi Country is found in the vicinity of the Margaret River, a major tributary of the Fitzroy. There are three defined seasons recognised by Gooniyandi language speakers. These are:

**Yidirla** - wet season time when the river runs

**Moongoowarla** - the overarching season of cold weather

**Barrangga** - very hot weather season

The rain, winds and storms arrive in Gooniyandi country from four different directions. The seasons are strongly tied to not only weather events, but also observations of resources connected to the river rather than individual billabongs, springs or floodplains.

Barndiwiri is the first rainstorm of the wet season and arrives from the north. People know that this storm will make the rivers run. After the first flood, which occurs within the Yidirla season, and after the bark of eucalypt trees peel, Gooniyandi fishers collect 'moon grubs' (jaalinyi) for bait. When the river and creeks are running it is good for fishing for catfish and the bigger fish – black bream, barramundi, sawfish, stingrays and turtles.

When the river floods for the second time in the wet season, Gooniyandi people know that several fruits (including native figs and white currants) will be ripe and wash into the water, providing food for fish and turtles. Walmajarri people know that if there is a poor wet season, this will not occur and the fish will have to rely on weed, leaving them 'skinny' and less appealing to eat.

Fish are said to shut their mouths when the Moongoowarla wind starts blowing from the east and the weather cools. As the wet season rains finish, the wind changes direction and the Garrawoorda blows from the south. The water is high and this is a good time for catching sawfish. The appearance of red dragonflies at this time also tells you sawfish are fat. March flies will arrive during Moongoowarla when all of the fish are fat and when freshwater Crocodiles are laying their eggs – as the march flies are said to protect them during this time. This is a particularly good time for bony bream, catfish, longnecked turtles, barramundi and spangled perch.

During Barrangga (the hot period at the end of the dry season), the pools in the river channel continue to dry and get smaller. When fishing these pools, trapped sawfish and barramundi won't bite, while catfish and bream will run for the bait. To catch barramundi and sawfish, people have to target the larger, deeper river pools. At the very end of the dry season when it is very hot, black bream, catfish and longtom will stop biting and start carrying and laying eggs.



**Questions:**

How does flooding impact the lives of the people of Gooniyandi Country?

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Search online for a recent newspaper article discussing flooding in the Fitzroy River, Western Australia. Does the article mention the Aboriginal Peoples and/or their perspectives?

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How does the perspective of flooding presented in the article you found differ from the viewpoint in this case study?

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What concepts or ideas from this case study could we apply to flood management elsewhere in Australia?

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**Sources:**

Anne Poelina, Kathrine S. Taylor & Ian Perdrisat (2019): [Martuwarra Fitzroy River Council: an Indigenous cultural approach to collaborative water governance](#), Australasian Journal of Environmental Management, DOI: 10.1080/14486563.2019.1651226

June Davis, Mervyn Street, Helen Malo, Isaac Chereh, Emma Woodward (CSIRO). 2011. Mingayooroo – Manyi Waranggiri Yarrangi. [Gooniyandi Seasons \(calendar\)](#), Margaret River, Fitzroy Valley, Western Australia. CSIRO (Land and Water).

Vogwill, R. (2015). Water resources of the Mardoowarra (Fitzroy River) catchment. University of Western Australia. Retrieved from <https://www.wilderness.org.au/images/resources/Wilderness-Society-REPORT-Water-Resources-of-the-Mardoowarra-Fitzroy-River-Catchment.pdf>

