

Living on the Lower Namoi

**Stories about the river, the fish and the people
in and around Walgett**



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Aboriginal readers are warned that this publication may contain the names and images of Aboriginal people who have since passed away.

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Living on the Lower Namoi

The Namoi River at Walgett, which traditionally means the meeting of two rivers, has always been a special place for the Aboriginal community. In the past it was treasured for its abundance of fresh water and food. The river was a place where families would gather and spend time fishing and swimming.

Some of the locals recall the river looking much different when they were kids, noting that it has changed significantly over time. There aren't as many native fish and the water is no longer clear.

The following stories have been given willingly by the local Aboriginal and fishing communities. They give us an insight into the history of the river, the fish and the people at Walgett.

Recordings these insights from the past will help guide future management actions in the catchment, whilst also ensuring that the memories and tales can be enjoyed by future generations.



The river is **very important** to me...we used to be on the river all the time, we used to be **fishing** and **swimming**. It used to be clear; you could **see the bottom** of the river...that's how it used to be.

Walgett local, Kim Sullivan

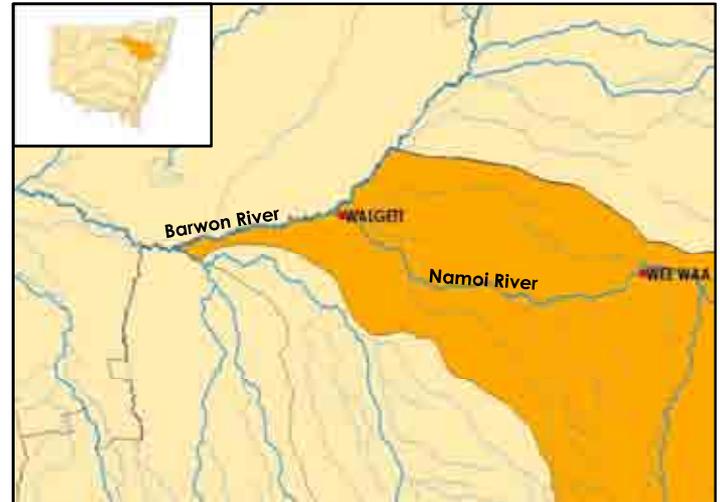
The Namoi River flows and floods, twists and turns its way over 800 km through north east NSW before linking with the Barwon-Darling River.

The system of streams drains an area of approximately 42,000 square kilometres providing an extensive range of aquatic habitat including swamps, floodplains, wetlands, creeks and rivers.

The land and waters of the Namoi catchment are the traditional home of the Gamilaraay people, who have a special connection with the surrounding environment. Whilst the catchment is now home to over 100,000 people, this connection still remains.

River health in the Namoi has changed over time, shaped largely by the industries that now dominate the landscape. Agriculture, including livestock, grain and cotton production, mining, and manufacturing have modified the land, affecting river flows and the animals that call it home.

And perhaps this is no more noticeable than at the Lower Namoi, the tail end of the system where upstream stresses are magnified.



The Lower Namoi region of the Namoi catchment, showing the town of Walgett, the focus of this booklet and the place where the Namoi and Barwon Rivers meet.

The flat lands of the Lower Namoi downstream of Wee Waa extend into an intricate array of flood runners, creeks and lagoons. These systems flow downstream into the broader Darling Basin near Walgett, a small town of over 1,800 people on the edge of the Namoi catchment.

The complexity of the Lower Namoi supports a significant range of plants, animals and aquatic life. The riverbank and floodplain are scattered with river red gum, river cooba and coolabah, whilst sedges and rushes can be found on the water's edge.

This type of vegetation usually supports a healthy river life, however fish populations in the Lower Namoi have been found to be in very poor condition. Researchers have found fewer than expected native species and more introduced fish species.

In recognition of the importance of its aquatic habitat, and the animals and plants that live there, the Namoi has been listed as part of the Endangered Ecological Community for the Lowland Darling River.

*This is what I like; **being** down here **on the river...in fact I love it.***

Walgett local, Aunty Valerie

State of the Lower Namoi: 'Very Poor'

The Sustainable Rivers Audit is used to assess the health of the Murray-Darling Basin's 23 major river valleys. Environmental indicators of fish, bugs and hydrology are monitored over time to determine condition and highlight trends.

Sampling was conducted in the Namoi valley during 2009, with the native fish communities of the lowland zone found to be in very poor condition.

Only six native fish species were caught, dominated by Bony Herring and Gudgeons. Three introduced fish species were found, Carp, Gambusia and Goldfish, which contributed over 20% of all fish caught.



Native fishes of the Lower Namoi

Bony Herring (Forkytails; Biirrnga)

Commonly 12-20cm.

Widespread species across the Basin's lowland waterways.



Murray Cod (Guduu)

Australia's largest freshwater fish that can grow to over 180cm, but commonly 40-60cm.

Prefer deep holes near instream habitat, especially logs.



Spangled Perch (Bobby Cod)

Average size of 15cm, reaching a maximum of 25cm.
One of the most widespread fish in the Basin. A hardy species that lives in a range of habitats.





Murray-Darling Rainbowfish

Commonly 5-7cm, with a maximum size of 9cm. Prefer areas of instream vegetation in slow moving waters of rivers, billabongs and swamps.



Golden Perch (Yellow Belly; Dhagaay)

Commonly 25-45cm, reaching a maximum size of 76cm. Important recreational fish that prefers lowland slow moving waters and can migrate over 1,000km to spawn.



Carp Gudgeon

Commonly 3-5cm. Usually found around aquatic vegetation in slow moving waterways across the Basin.

Freshwater Yabby (Crayfish; Crawbob; Giirray)

Can reach a total body length of 16cm. A popular food source and fishing bait throughout the Basin; can occupy a range of freshwater systems.



Threatened fishes of the Lower Namoi



Freshwater Catfish (Gaygay)

Average size of 50cm, reaching a maximum of 90cm. Murray-Darling Basin population listed as endangered in NSW. Were once caught in the Lower Namoi.



Silver Perch (Black Bream; Gambaal; Banngala)

Commonly 35cm, reaching a maximum size of 50cm. Listed as vulnerable in NSW and were once a common catch in the Lower Namoi, preferring slow moving waterways.

Introduced fishes of the Lower Namoi



Goldfish

Commonly 15-20cm.
Widespread across the Basin competing with native fish for food and space.



Carp

A medium to large size fish that can grow to 120cm.
Noxious species in NSW that can survive in very degraded habitat.

Gambusia (Mosquitofish)

Maximum size of 6cm.
Aggressive fish from America that prefer warm, slow waters.



Tilapia **New Threat to the Basin**

Commonly 20cm.
A hardy species found in southern Queensland that thrives in degraded systems. Report if seen.

Where the anglers should be happy

The waters of the Lower Namoi were once a haven for native fish and a paradise for fishers.

The fishing folklore of Walgett is painted with stories of massive Murray Cod being caught weighing over 250 pounds, and huge hauls of the iconic fish being taken to supply the Sydney fish markets.

The historically high abundance of native fish in the area has unfortunately given way to fish populations in very poor condition.

Many of the species previously found in the Lower Namoi, including the threatened catfish and silver perch (black bream), are few and far between, with some fisherman not seeing either for over 25 years.

Local fisherman Barry Henry was born and raised in Walgett and has spent all his life on the banks of the Lower Namoi. He fishes whenever he gets the chance, and has noticed these changes first hand.

“We used to catch lots of fish including yellow belly, cod, catfish and black bream (silver perch), but 1987 was when I would have caught my last black bream...at least that far back.”

These tales are shared by many fishers along the Lower Namoi, including John McGovern, a keen angler who has lived in Walgett for over 45 years.

“Back in the day you used to be able to catch lots of catfish and black bream, but not anymore. I’ve maybe caught two catfish in the last 25 years.”

Whilst the fish are a long way from their historical numbers it’s not all bad news.



Catches of big Murray Cod from the Lower Namoi were once a common sight (Photo: Ted Fuller).

Jason Murray, a local Aboriginal man who has fished the Barwon River near Walgett all his life, hasn't caught a catfish for over 15 years, but fishing with a friend recently they got a welcome surprise.

"My mate caught a little catfish, so they must still be breeding somewhere. It was only a little one."

John also recalled that during recent flood events when the river levels were high he *"caught nine yellow belly on three worms in just 45 minutes."*

And this is probably the most common native fish of the Lower Namoi, the glorious Golden Perch, which has such a reputation in Walgett that a bend in the river has been named after it.



The Walgett Spectator showing hundreds of Murray Cod being prepared for the Sydney Fish Markets (Source: Ted Fuller).

A maze of dirt tracks through the bush and along the riverbank opens up to a point in the river known locally as Yellow Belly Bend.

A favourite spot for locals that Jason says has *"Cod near where all the logs and tea trees are. Bigger ones are hard to come by, but there are lots of yellow belly."*

This promise of fish brought not only anglers but also families down to the banks to experience the river.



Yellow Belly Bend on the Namoi River is a favourite spot for fishers and families (Photo: Milly Hobson).

More than a river

“Yellow Belly with Johnny cakes, that’s what we used to have”, exclaimed Kim Sullivan, a Walgett local when recounting her favourite times growing up on the river.

And this was a sentiment shared by many of the local Aboriginal community members of the Lower Namoi. The river was more than a place to go fishing; it was a place to gather and it was vital for their livelihood.

Kim grew up on Namoi Reserve located on the northern outskirts of Walgett and relied on the river for fun, food and life.

“As a child we used to be on the river all the time, we used to be fishing and swimming...our camp used to be right on the river bank. Our grandmother would send us down to get our water in buckets. So we survived, without the river I don’t think we would have.”

When the **river** is **sad**, the **town** is **sad**.
Walgett local, Beth Wright



Auntie Valerie preparing Johnny cakes, a family favourite, on the banks of the Namoi (Photo: Milly Hobson).

But this relationship has changed as the river has changed over time. Upstream impacts have affected the health of the Lower Namoi and in turn the use and value of this once vital system has suffered significantly.

Annette Kennedy, a local Aboriginal woman, recalled that the river used to almost always be full, but not anymore.

“Everyone used to live on the river and they would use the river water...now the water is no good.”

Uncle Tim now lives in Walgett and spent a lot of time on the river during the 1950s. He's noticed the changes to the waterway and the use of the river.

“The river was crystal clear...you could stand on the bank and the water was that clear that you could see the catfish swimming around their nests. Used to be plants along the banks too; you could just rake the plants on the edge and get craw bobs.”

“Back in the '50s you weren't allowed to swim in the public baths, so the kids just swam in the river (but) people don't swim much in the river anymore.”



The Namoi River is also important for a range of other native birds and animals, including goannas (Photo: Milly Hobson).

The loss of this once favoured recreation activity is also shared by Jason Murray, who enjoyed the days out on the river.

“The swimming holes are now full of logs and we can't see what's in the water now. It's not clear like it used to be. There was a big old tree that went out into the river and we used to dive off it; there used to be deep holes there.”

John McGovern, a keen fisher with fond memories of the river that once was, also recalls the glory days of the Lower Namoi.

“You used to be able to stand on a log and watch a cod swimming around, maybe 3 – 4 feet under the water...used to be water plants everywhere too (but) you don't see any of that now.”

The current state of the Lower Namoi, complete with bare banks, muddy water and far fewer native fish is hard to miss, leaving John to declare that *“the river is an absolute mess now!”*

How do you **get something back** to how it used to be?

Walgett local, Kim Sullivan

The river, it is a-changing

Changes to the river have been occurring for a very long time, most noticeably since the 1950s. There are many varied reasons and thoughts given for the changes to the Lower Namoi, but there was a clear consensus on what has had the major impact; the pest fish known as carp.

John McGovern first recalled catching carp in Walgett during the 1970s, and unfortunately they have become a common catch.

"I hadn't seen a carp before I moved to Walgett. I didn't know what it was...can't print what I think of them."

The introduced fish has been blamed for the dirty water in the river, the loss of aquatic plants along the river bank, and the poor fishing.

This is a common story all across the Murray-Darling Basin, but it does beg the question if carp are the cause or just the symptom of a degraded system?

For centuries, inland waterways have suffered significant impacts. Changes to natural flows, removal of snags, increased nutrients and clearing

of land for agricultural and urban development have all impacted native fish and created ideal conditions for carp to dominate.

The high number of carp in the Lower Namoi reflects these additional impacts, which have been noticed by the local community.

Local Aboriginal woman Beth Wright has noticed that *"fish are always trying to swim upstream (but) can't get past the weir."*



Carp were first introduced into Australia in ponds during the 1870s, but escaped into the River Murray in the 1960s and rapidly spread during the 1970s (Photo: Anthony Townsend).

The town weir in Walgett, and subsequent weirs upstream, have changed the flow of the Namoi and created stagnant pools favoured by carp. These barriers also block fish passage as they try to swim upstream to feed and breed.

Impacts from changes to land use upstream have also been noticed in the Lower Namoi, affecting water quality and native fish.

John McGovern has noticed how the river is *“all silted up”*. There is also a perception that an increased use of chemicals for land management has decreased water quality and the health of native fish. Beth Wright has noticed that fish now *“have more sores on them”*.

The Lower Namoi has also been subject to black water events during past floods. Black water occurs naturally and is caused by the breakdown of vegetation on flooded lands, which can lead to low oxygen levels in waterways and fish kills.

Local fishermen Barry Henry recalled the black water event during the 1999/2000 flood, saying *“There were fish kills. Yellow belly and cod were dying on the banks at the golf course.”*

Although they are natural events, the occurrence of

black water has been heightened by changes to river and land management over time.

But it's not too late to turn the tide on the changing river. Activities to improve aquatic habitat and bring back native fish are being undertaken across the catchment. These projects are empowering local communities and landholders to return waterways to their former glory.

Bringing Back the Fish

The Namoi Demonstration Reach is improving river health and fish habitat along a 150 km reach of the Namoi River between Gunnedah and Narrabri.

The program, established in 2007, is a collaborative initiative between Namoi CMA, NSW DPI, the MDBA, community groups, Aboriginal groups, recreational fishers and landholders.

Since it commenced, the demonstration reach has returned over 300 snags to the river, planted over 14,500 native trees and aquatic vegetation, and managed over 33 km of woody weeds and riparian land through fencing and providing off stream water.

The project is achieving significant outcomes that will benefit communities upstream and downstream.

Living Culture in the Namoi

The partnership formed by Namoi CMA and NSW DPI engaged the local community of Walgett about the river, fish and the special connection that people have with the surrounding environment.

Activities completed during the project raised awareness of the local river, native fish populations and importance of healthy habitat. Adults, kids and families enjoyed getting down to the river to learn more about these aspects whilst spending time on the banks of the Namoi River.

The *Living on the Lower Namoi* booklet links this information to the local experience, providing a starting point for sharing knowledge and experiences that will help improve the health of the Namoi catchment.

Project staff are extremely grateful for the people

who contributed their time, stories and images to the project. Your efforts have been greatly appreciated and we sincerely thank you for your involvement.



Simon Taylor from Namoi CMA (left) with some of the Lower Namoi storytellers including (l-r) Annette Kennedy, Aunty Valerie, and Jason Murray.

River Resources

NSW DPI (Tamworth)

Milly Hobson – 6763 1206
Anthony Townsend – 6763 1440
David Ward – 6763 1255

Namoi CMA

Narrabri Office – 6790 7701
Gunnedah Office – 6742 9220
Tamworth Office – 6764 5907

Western CMA

Walgett – 6828 0110
Dharriwaa Elders Group
Walgett – 6828 2619

Yellowbelly Bend

1. If you're thinking 'bout fishing out Walgett way, well, there's just one spot so the locals say.
In muddy little gully by the Barwon's end you'll find Yellowbelly Bend.
No, it's not some outback paradise, though snakes and sandflies think it's nice.
But the yellowbelly bite from dusk to dawn on yabbies, worms and frozen prawns.

Ch: In a muddy little gully by the Barwon's end there's a clearing at the weir known as Yellowbelly Bend
And if you love fishing come along with me, you'll always catch yourself a feed (Ch)

2. Let me take you down along a winding track to a place you won't find on the map
Through the Mitchell Grass and the mulga too and mud that sticks like Superglue.
But you'll love those nights you get to spend down at Yellowbelly Bend.
Cause when the river's high and the moon is bright the big ones are about to bite (Ch)

3. No, you won't regret that trip my friend to good old Yellowbelly Bend.
You can taste the freedom way out here but bring strong boots and camping gear.
I can see those yellowbelly now on a campfire slowly turning brown
We'll cook some spuds and drink some beer And watch our worries disappear (Ch)

End: And if you love fishing like you say you do well, where the bloody hell are you?



aquatic habitat rehabilitation
making more fish ...naturally

