Community aspirations for the World Heritage Listing of the Budj Bim Lava Flow

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Dating back thousands of years, the Budj Bim lava flow provides evidence of a large, settled Aboriginal community systematically farming and smoking eels for food and trade in what is considered to be one of the world’s oldest and largest aquaculture ventures. Gunditjmara people constructed the channels to manipulate water flows and the weirs to modify and create wetlands that provided ideal growing conditions for the shortfinned eel and other fish. At least 6600 years old, the system is still largely intact with Gunditjmara people continuing to practice their cultural traditions on the lava flow.

In the Gunditjmara Native Title consent determination of March 2007 the Federal Court of Australia recognised that the Gunditjmara were able to prove their strong and unrelenting connection to this area where their ancestors farmed eels for food and trade at the time of European settlement and back through millennia.

The potential of a World Heritage nomination for Aboriginal stone houses and fish traps along the Budj Bim lava flow was first discussed in 1988–89. The Victoria Archaeological Survey recommended that the State government not proceed with an announcement for a World Heritage nomination and included in its response was ‘that any request for (World Heritage) nomination should be initiated by the Aboriginal community’.

Figure 2: Budj Bim – view of Lake Condah. (Source: Gunditjmiring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation)
In February 2002 the Winda Mara Aboriginal Corporation, in partnership with Gunditjmara traditional owners, launched the Lake Condah Sustainable Development Project Master Plan. One of the project’s objectives was ‘to gain the National and World Heritage listing for the Budj Bim lava flow’.

The Budj Bim National Heritage Landscape was inscribed on the National Heritage List in July 2004 and is a nationally significant and unique landscape whose system of fish traps, wetlands, channels and weirs are of outstanding heritage value.

The World Heritage Committee Global Strategy for a Representative, Balanced and Credible World Heritage List aims to ensure that the List reflects the world’s cultural and natural diversity of Outstanding Universal Value.

A recently completed draft Comparative Analysis includes the following:

- The Budj Bim Cultural Landscape is a rare, intact and representative example of ‘intensively manipulated eco-cultural landscapes’ that has survived through the continuity of Gunditjmara cultural and social practices and active management of the landscape.

- The use of stone as a raw material and the relative lack of development on the ‘stones’ or lava flow following European settlement means that the tangible evidence of the aquaculture system has survived. The scale and the ability to ‘read’ the system of aquaculture in the Budj Bim landscape makes it not only representative of the very wide range of sites and landscapes created by Indigenous use of wetlands and aquatic resources but also exceptional.

- The Budj Bim Cultural Landscape has the potential to fill a critical gap on the World Heritage List.

The Gunditjmara Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation was established in 2006 by Gunditjmara traditional owners to address caring for country, cultural strengthening, community development and well-being.

Gunditjmara Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation continues to work with the Winda Mara Aboriginal Corporation and the Budj Bim Sustainable Development Partnership to achieve the aim of placing the Budj Bim National Heritage Landscape onto Australia’s World Heritage Tentative List in 2014.