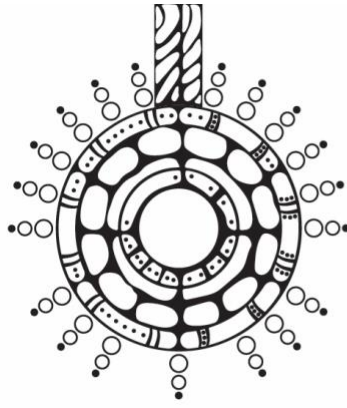




Aboriginal Collaboration  
Case Study August 2020



**Our Coast**  
**Our Land**  
**STRIVING TOGETHER**



*Zac Webb, Wadandi Cultural Custodian on a Cultural walk along the river at the launch of the Wooditjup Bilya Protection Strategy.*

## Wooditjup Bilya Protection Strategy

Working together to maintain the ecological health of the Margaret River

By Caroline Hughes,  
Nature Conservation Margaret River Region

*Bringing stakeholders to the table to manage the Margaret River has been a vision of Nature Conservation Margaret River Region for many years. With the completion of the Wooditjup Bilya Protection Strategy in 2019 the group saw, not only its vision for the river realised, but also the emergence of a successful collaboration with the traditional custodians of the river, the local Wadandi people.*

In 2017 Nature Conservation Margaret River Region and the Augusta Margaret River Shire embarked on the preparation of a catchment plan for the Margaret River. The aim of the plan was to maintain the ecological health of the river into the future. A Margaret River Collaborative Management Group representing key state agencies, local government and community organisations was established to oversee the preparation of the plan. Involvement of the local traditional owners, through representation of Wadandi Elder, Wayne Webb on the collaborative group, was considered essential from the onset.

The collaborative group embarked on a well-intentioned planning process - setting a vision for the future of the river, identifying management objectives and prioritising actions and allocating roles and responsibilities. We heard eloquently from Wayne Webb at the commencement of the process about his deep connection to the river, and his desire for people to care for it into the future. Wayne sat quietly through a number of meetings and we always wondered if we were adequately addressing his concerns.

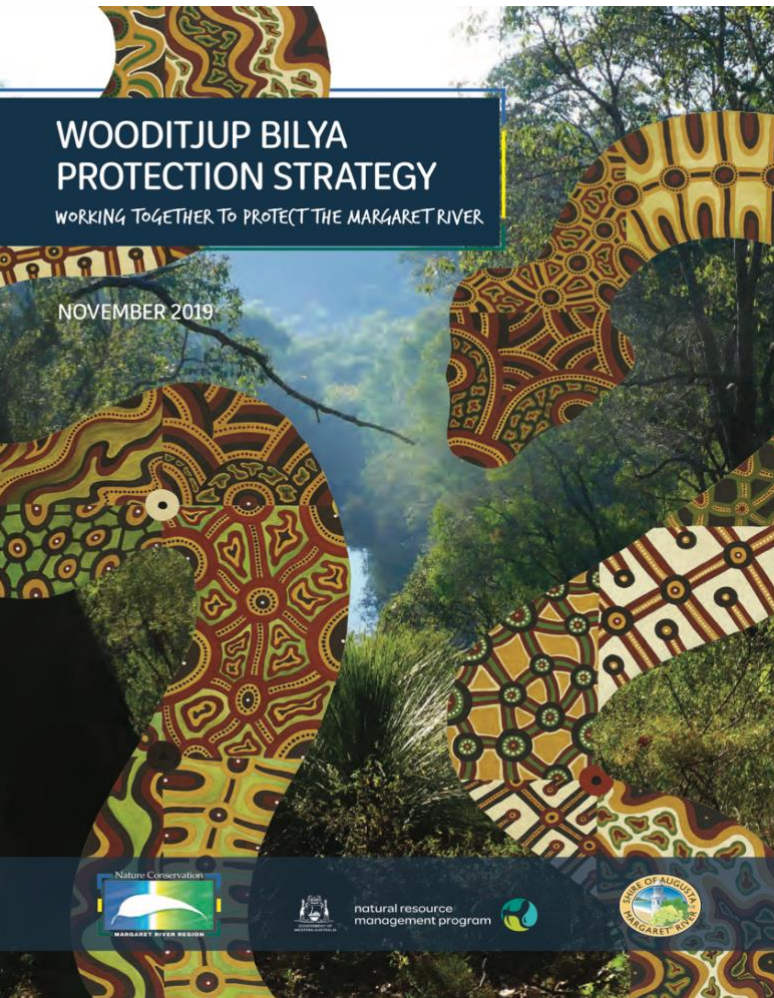
The Draft Margaret River Protection Strategy, based on a model developed for the Swan Canning Protection Strategy, was released for public comment during 2018. At this point and quite out of the blue strong opposition to the plan was voiced by Wayne Webb's son, Iszaac (Zac) Webb. Zac expressed deep concern that the Strategy didn't adequately recognise Aboriginal Cultural Values and that the Wadandi people had not been consulted adequately in its preparation. We realised that we had got it very wrong! Getting it wrong threatened, not only the collaborative process and the strategy, but also the future relationship between the Undalup Association and Nature Conservation, a relationship we thought was strong, one which we valued enormously.

*Wayne Webb, Wadandi Elder on the banks of Wooditjup Bilya.  
Photo courtesy of the Undalup Association.*





We changed tack and invited Zac in to discuss the strategy. We outlined our intent and our vision for the river and listened closely to his concerns. We found our visions were very much aligned – looking after Wooditjup Bilya for the future. We agreed to a number of major changes to the strategy document including a rewrite of the section on Aboriginal Heritage and Cultural Values and the inclusion of the Wadandi story of the river up front in the document. Generously Zac suggested the strategy take the Wadandi name for the river, Wooditjup Bilya, and that Aboriginal artwork that represents the Wadandi Boodja (country) be used on its cover.



The resulting Wooditjup Bilya Protection Strategy is a beautiful document reflecting the Wadandi values and connection to the river through artwork and story and providing a guide for the community to protect the river into the future. The process of stopping and reconnecting with our traditional custodians meant a lot to both parties and has built a strong collaboration for the future.

The strategy was launched at a public gathering on the banks of Wooditjup Bilya and Zac exhibited great pride when talking about the strategy document. He later took launch participants on a Cultural walk along the banks of the river to tell his stories and raise understanding of his people’s connection to the river and to country. Nature Conservation and others in the collaborative group have become better connected to the Wadandi Cultural Values of the river, and developed confidence about their role in protecting the river’s health on behalf of its traditional owners.

The Wooditjup Bilya Collaborative Group, as it is now known, now meets annually on country with the Undalup Association. Wayne is not so involved as he has been in the past and relies on Zac to keep the Cultural Connections strong. This annual walk along the river reconnects the group with the Cultural and spiritual essence of the river, cultivates the friendship, develops the mutual respect, and reminds us all of the strong collaboration that has developed for the good of Wooditjup Bilya and Caring for Country.

*The Wooditjup Bilya Protection Strategy with six season’s artwork by Pilbulmun/Wadandi artist Sandra Hill.*

Nature Conservation Margaret River Region has learnt a great deal from the Wooditjup Bilya collaborative process -

- Never assume that planning processes are an appropriate way to consult with Aboriginal people and result in genuine collaborations.
- Although landcare and Aboriginal caring for country visions are very often aligned, never assume support for what you do. Respect Cultural LORE, Ask First and spend time to develop understanding.
- Use of Aboriginal language, Cultural artwork and stories helps to connect to Aboriginal culture and give traditional custodians appropriate recognition and ownership.
- Meeting on country makes all the difference, allowing Aboriginal people to share their stories and Cultural knowledge to build better Cultural understanding for the collaborative parties.
- Cultivation of long-term connections and mutual respect is vital to any successful collaboration.

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