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PADDLING BEATS PAGES FOR BREWARRINA, BOURKE AND GOODOOGA STUDENTS

Eighteen students from Goodooga, Brewarrina and Bourke schools concluded their three day trip on the Barwon-Darling today, declaring it a great way to learn.

The students learnt about water and river health issues during the trip, which is a school activity supported and funded by the Western Catchment Aboriginal Reference Advisory Group (ARAG).

The boys and girls were accompanied by teachers, Marcus Geale from Goodooga, Zane van den Berg and Tracey Walford from Brewarrina and James Warne of Bourke, two trained canoe instructors and James Leigo and Craig Alison from the Western Catchment Management Authority (CMA).

The support team included Western Catchment ARAG members Paul Gordon and Guy Gibbs, Brewarrina local and Indigenous language teacher Brad Steadman, and Western CMA staff Alan Holt, Barry Edwards and Blackie Gordon.

15 year old Matt Toole of Bourke School said he enjoyed learning new information in a practical way.

"There were lots of hands on activities. We were never bored," he said.

"I liked learning about the different trees, birds and wildlife and about how they are affected by water quality and erosion.

"Learning how the Aboriginal people used what they had around them to live was excellent.

"My favourite part of the trip was going to Yambacoona Mountain between Brewarrina and Bourke where they used sandstone to make grinding plates," Mr Toole said.

Hank Boney, a 15 year old student of Goodooga School and a member of the Moorawarri people, said he enjoyed being outside and learning from each other and was surprised at how many cultural heritage sites were around.

"Every hundred metres we found something, like ancient campfires that were a couple of thousand years old, nardoo grinding plates and scar trees where people had cut coolamons," he said.

"We heard about the Ngemba, Moorawarri, Barkindji and Kamillaroi people who came down to share the fish traps at Brewarrina and the ochre quarry.

"We also learnt about the vegetation and water and the bugs and salinity and we played basketball and canoe polo as well," he said.

Western CMA Aboriginal Community Support Officer, Blackie Gordon, says the group paddled approximately 15km per day as well as undertaking bushwalking and outdoor educational activities.

"As well as relying on the river for food and water, Indigenous people have a strong spiritual connection with the river," Mr Gordon said.



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"The trip started with a visit to the ochre quarry and Aboriginal fish traps at Brewarrina, which highlight this interdependence and were a great inter-tribal meeting place.

"The students learnt about water quality and salinity information and plant identification as well as river health and cultural heritage aspects of the river.

"We could see first-hand the animals that rely on the river such as yellowbelly and cod, insects and lizards, as well as the effects of erosion, salinity and stock drinking from the river.

"We explained the methodology behind rehabilitating sections of the river, such as resnagging.

"The group returned by bus each afternoon to their accommodation where they analysed information from their water samples and undertook other educational activities.

"This has been a wonderful opportunity to allow these young people to connect with their Aboriginal culture and to learn about the natural environment," Mr Gordon said.

Goodooga teacher, Marcus Geale, said he was nursing sore muscles from paddling but deemed the trip lots of fun and a great success.

"I had no idea how much cultural heritage was there," he said.

"Every time we pulled the canoes up to the bank there would be something else to discover – stone artefacts, campfires and huge scar trees where the bark had been used for canoes. It was just incredible!" he said.

"It was wonderful to work together with the three schools, the Western CMA and the Aboriginal Reference Advisory Group because everyone could bring a wealth of information to the students," he said.

The Western Catchment Aboriginal Reference Advisory Group comprises 22 members who represent the majority of Aboriginal language groups and communities with large Aboriginal populations in the Western Catchment.

The canoe trip is one of a range of initiatives they are supporting to involve the Aboriginal community of the Western Catchment in improving natural resources.

It is a pilot project and the ARAG would seek to support other schools conducting similar trips in the future.

In addition, the ARAG provides valuable advice to the Board of the Western CMA to ensure that decisions affecting the long-term sustainability of the environment are compatible with Aboriginal culture and values.

ENDS – For further information, please contact:

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Captions:

- Western Catchment ARAG member, Paul Gordon, with the students
- Ethan Johnson of Brewarrina School
- Mark Lowe and Bob Wilson of Bourke School with Western Catchment ARAG member, Guy Gibbs.
- Louise Denis and Marinda Simpson of Brewarrina School
- Hank Boney of Goodooga School.