Faculty of Humanities

2021 Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarships
Strategic Project Profile

PROJECT TITLE: Reconnecting to Rivers

FIELD OF RESEARCH CODE: 1205; 1604; 2002; 2103; 1302

PROJECT SYNOPSIS:

Curtin’s Reconnecting to Rivers project will demonstrate how best practice approaches to historic river landscape planning – based on a holistic understanding of how these landscapes have been used, managed and valued over time by both Noongar and non-Indigenous communities – can help improve the long-term prospects for our river systems.

The centre of the project is a collaborative mapping and monitoring process, mapping boodjar, run by and with Whadjuk Noongar leaders. These leaders and their families have long advocated for the socio-ecologies and important dreaming that sustain the Blackadder-Woodbridge catchment where the pilot project is based.

The outcomes of this initiative will be twofold. First, it will implement international best practice in historic urban river landscape planning and management to benefit Perth landscapes and inhabitants through reports, plans, and community activities (see below in project outputs).
Second, the project will allow Curtin University to consolidate expertise in historic river landscape conservation, creating a multidisciplinary knowledge cluster to inform both teaching and research activities. This includes already secured funding for four international fellowships, two masterclasses, student fieldtrips with custodians and the catchment group.

This approach takes historic landscape planning as a foundation, conserving heritage through planning and design interventions that take into account social, historical, geographical, ecological, spiritual and aesthetic factors including the practices and values of residents. It recognises that both dynamism and continuity are vital for heritage places to flourish. Our team is multidisciplinary reflecting these diverse priorities.

Our pilot project, focused on Blackadder Creek in Midland and Swan View, will explore the critical link between an urban river landscape and the memory, life and health of a Perth community, documenting the value of waterways to wellbeing while providing the knowledge and tools to better protect these landscapes for future generations.

Reconnecting to Rivers brings together researchers from areas of research strength (Planning, Geography, Civil Engineering, Education, and Cultural Studies) to address this wicked problem of sustaining delicate socio-ecologies in urban areas. This is an emerging research capability that will grow through RtR outcomes and collaborations. Furthermore, using best-practice in collaborative research methods with Aboriginal people locates Curtin at the cutting edge of addressing Aboriginal heritage issues. This is an area that many local governments and NRM organisations aspire to do well, and has excellent prospects for replication.

RtR builds the profile of Curtin’s research through attention to collaboration with other organisations (Whadjuk Noongar custodians, City of Swan, Blackadder-Woodbridge Catchment Group amongst others), four international research fellowships, and two masterclasses that will promote Curtin’s expertise and leadership. These are already funded through the Feilman Foundation. RtR also will engage with undergraduate students through fieldtrips, creating a pathway for further honours and HDR students. Research and teaching activities are closely linked in RtR at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

RtR also supports Curtin’s commitment to reconciliation, and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals for water management (6), sustainable cities and communities (11), and terrestrial systems (15). In summary, RtR demonstrates Curtin’s commitment to be a “highly collaborative university, supporting partnerships across faculties, campuses and external institutions and ensuring that our research and teaching activities are closely linked.”

Reconnecting to Rivers will begin in January 2021. It builds a new cross-disciplinary research focus on historic river landscapes within Humanities and draws on expertise in Engineering. While members of the research team have worked with each other in the past to deliver substantial and high quality research activities and outputs (as evidenced by the research outputs below), further outputs and publications from the entire team will begin from 2021 once the project begins.

We are proposing two PhD programs. The first will apply deep mapping to the Blackadder Creek Catchment to augment the archival and interview data that will be collected through the project. Deep mapping will focus on the non-Aboriginal heritages and experiences of Blackadder Creek. It will constitute both a geo-referenced archive and a PhD dissertation. The output from the PhD will inform the development of a walking trail and interpretative signage.
A second PhD program will undertake a geo-history of the relations between salt and fresh water in the catchment. Using concepts from environmental humanities and political geography, the PhD will use geological and archival data to interrogate the relationship and effects of salt water intrusion on the Blackadder landscape, and its implications for its human and non-human inhabitants.

FEASIBILITY AND RESOURCING – DESCRIPTION OF THE SUPPORT THIS PROJECT WILL RECEIVE:

This project has been funded for $330,000 by the Feilman Foundation. It will also receive in-kind support from Curtin through the research time of the project team, which has been signed off by Heads of School and the PVC of Humanities.

We are currently applying for $345,000 in additional funding through the state NRM, for ORS strategic funding, and will approach Lotterywest in September. We have been working with Advancement to approach and engage partners and seek funding opportunities.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROJECT/ PROGRAM FOR THE ENROLLING SCHOOL OR INSTITUTION:

Reconnecting to Rivers is a cross-disciplinary collaboration across and beyond Humanities and with partner organisations on the pressing issue of threatened river landscapes. Its significance to DBE and Humanities are:

- RtR aligns with areas of research strength (Human Geography, Urban and Regional Planning, Cultural Studies, and Education).
- RtR aligns teaching and research through its use of fieldtrips, action research and Geodesign.
- RtR strengthens engagement and relationships with Whadjuk Noongar custodians in a location and on a subject of great importance.
- RtR addresses Sustainable Development goals for water management (6), sustainable cities and communities (11), and terrestrial systems (15).

Students must express interest in this scholarship opportunity by emailing the Project Lead listed below. Please provide a copy of your current curriculum vitae and detail your suitability to be involved in this strategic project.

PROJECT LEAD CONTACT:

Name: Tod Jones
School: School of Design and the Built Environment
Faculty: Humanities
Email: T.Jones@curtin.edu.au
Contact Number: 08 9266 4709