

Country comes first

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The big dry is not only about the farmers. It took the words of a 16-year-old schoolgirl spoken to the thousands gathered in the Domain during the Climate Strike to highlight the plight of Aboriginal people and their lands.

"I am here on the authority of my elders," Kamilaroi girl Marlie Thomas, a year 11 student at Gunnedah High School, told the crowd.

She had travelled to Sydney, on their authority, to speak to the rally about how rising temperatures and drought are affecting Indigenous communities in regional NSW.

"I struggle to think of one way climate change doesn't affect our culture," she told the rally. "I have had to help collect bottled water for our family in Walgett. Many other towns in NSW are facing the same crisis.



"We rely on Country and these rivers are our life. The red gums are dying and the traditional food supply is difficult."

She also wrote an opinion piece for *The Sydney Morning Herald* on the day of the strike, where she outlined her activism and what Country meant to her.

"Growing up in Gunnedah under record-hot summers, we'd take ourselves down to the river," she wrote. "As kids, we swung ourselves into the Namoi River to cool down.

"It took care of us. When I join the school strike for climate for the second time today, I will be taking care of it and of my country, Kamilaroi country."

"The river took care of me so now I'm taking care of it."

She wrote that the Mooki River, Cox Creek and the Namoi River are dry.

"We can't go and do the cultural things we used to be able to do: going to the river, catching some yabbies, fishing, or simply bringing water to where it's needed."

"We fight, not only for the future of young people but to respect our elders. We are responsible to be part of the solutions to the issues surrounding climate change, and we want to be involved.

"Climate movements must put Indigenous people at the centre because this isn't just about the future, but also the present and the past.

"It's about justice for us." Bruce Shillingsworth, a Muruwari and Budjiti man from north-western NSW, appeared on ABC's *Q&A* on 28 October after he brought together the river communities of the region for the Yaama Ngunna Baaka Corroboree.

He had a clear message from the "voiceless" communities.

"The impact of the water mismanagement, and the corruption and the corporate greed and capitalism in this country has killed our rivers," he told the program.

"A lot of the First Nation people are leaving their tribal ... lands ... that they've lived on for thousands of thousands of years.

"How do we bring back the 50-year-old cods? How do we bring back the freshwater mussels? "How do we bring back the aquatic life, the ecosystem and the animals that relied on the river and the water?

"They're now completely dead. They're extinct. This has happened over the last 100 years. Australia needs to wake up."