Straddling both sides of the iconic Murray River 200km due north of Melbourne is an awe-inspiring landscape, the Barmah-Millewa Forest. This expansive complex of woodland and ephemeral wetlands is the largest Red Gum forest in the world.

Its Traditional Owners, the Yorta Yorta people, have long focused on Barmah-Millewa as their ‘heartland.’ Since European invasion, Yorta Yorta have maintained an unbroken campaign for their land rights and the health of country, including at least 18 formal claims for land and compensation. The most recent of these began in 1998, when Yorta Yorta elders asked Friends of the Earth to join a campaign to protect Barmah-Millewa and re-establish their rights to manage the forest.

With the vision of seeking social and environmental justice, new alliances were formed and the Friends of the Earth Barmah-Millewa Collective was born.

Downstream at Nyah-Vinifera, the 1,000 ha Red Gum forest on Wadi Wadi country was also threatened with renewed logging after a twenty-year absence. A parallel campaign formed the Friends of Nyah-Vinifera.

The following twelve years saw extensive lobbying of both state and federal governments to have Red Gum forests protected. Direct actions such as blocking illegal logging operations worked in unison with lobbying, community education and outreach. Alliances grew and battlelines joined along the river. A unified Red Gum campaign emerged involving numerous conservation groups and Traditional Owner nations.

In 2009, the Victorian government protected 91,000 ha of Red Gum forest in new parks, including Barmah National Park and Nyah-Vinifera Park. A year later, New South Wales finally caved to community pressure and protected a further 114,000 ha, including Millewa. In both states, these particular forests were singled out for co-management with their Aboriginal Owners.

Auspiciously, in July 2010, just weeks after the parks were officially launched, floodwaters began to trickle out onto the forest floor. After a decade of drought, wetlands sprung to life along the Murray. Throughout spring and summer, Barmah-Millewa and Nyah-Vinifera were inundated with water, allowing fish, birds and aquatic plant life to breed and restore dwindling populations.

“On the long road to land justice, Barmah-Millewa has always been a beacon for Yorta Yorta people. Over the past decade Friends of the Earth have walked this road with us, becoming a trusted ally and true friend. Together we’ve notched up a great milestone with the creation of Barmah-Millewa National Park, creating a cultural and ecological foundation for Yorta Yorta into the future.”

Neville Atkinson, Chairperson of Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation