Justice, beauty in the Barmah

THE High Court ruling handing traditional owners control over coastal fishing in northeast Arnhem Land may be far out of sight for Victorians.

But it shouldn't be out of mind.

That landmark ruling also means Premier Brumby has the chance to bring about an historic turning point for indigenous people here.

It is no secret that decades of inaction from state governments has delivered minimal outcomes for the traditional owners of Victoria.

But more recently, signs of faint goodwill have been emerging.

The co-operative agreement signed in 2003 by the state and the Yorta Yorta (traditional owners of land and waters along the Murray-Goulburn Rivers in northern Victoria) was hailed as a "historic" achievement by Attorney-General Rob Hulls.

Since then, however, the agreement has failed to deliver tangible outcomes for the Yorta Yorta, and has been largely ignored by government departments, which were delegated to implement the agreement.

The Yorta Yorta have long been requesting this public land be managed to reflect its natural and rich cultural heritage values.

Instead, the State Government continued to allow internationally recognised wetlands like the Barmah Forest to be desecrated by logging and subsidised cattle grazing.

Dr Wayne Atkinson is a Yorta Yorta elder and a senior lecturer and fellow in the school of politics, criminology and sociology at Melbourne University

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The Yorta Yorta have called for the area to be designated a national park under a handback-leaseback and joint management arrangement with traditional owners. This is a model that has proved successful elsewhere.

Late last month a long-awaited independent report commissioned by the State Government handed down a series of recommendations for new parks and reserves to protect Murray River Red Gums and improve the health of the river system.

The **Victorian Environmental Assessment Council** recommended creating Victoria’s first national parks that would be jointly managed with the traditional owners.

This unique park would be created in the Barmah forest -- the world’s largest River Red Gum forest of its kind -- with smaller parks downstream at Gunbower and near Swan Hill.

To say that this recommendation is historic would be true, but the real test will be whether Premier Brumby delivers on the findings.

At the 2006 state election the Labor Government promised to create new national parks if recommended by VEAC.

Joint park management would be a significant step towards delivering on reconciling indigenous and non-indigenous interests in land and cultural matters.

The Yorta Yorta are ready to embrace a partnership with the Victorian Government and community.

A new jointly managed national park would recognise their inherent rights as the traditional owners.

Opportunities for new employment initiatives in indigenous communities with extremely high unemployment rates will be welcome.

These are magnificent natural areas, if managed and restored properly.

Opportunities for increased nature- based tourism and cultural heritage experiences through restoration of the Dharnya Cultural Centre are just part of what can be achieved.

The entire community will benefit by providing some justice for indigenous traditional owners.

If Premier Brumby truly leads on behalf of all Victorians, as he often claims, then he will deliver.

He would be remembered well.

If not, he will simply become another Victorian premier who failed to deliver real social justice outcomes for indigenous Victorians.