Fight for future helps heal wounds of the past

NUR PETERS

UNDEER the gnarled branches of an ancient red gum, two people stand on land that one of their ancestors stole from the other's.

Allega Curr is the great, great, great granddaughter of Edward Curr, the first squatter in the Barrah Forest in northern Victoria.

Wayne Atkinson is an indigenous forebear who lived on the banks of the Murray River for several years, until Curr arrived with his sheep. They have united in support of a plan to turn the area into a national park — a bill to halt the death of the remaining river red-gum forests.

In a draft report released in July, the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council recommended that the State Government create four new national parks and provide billions of litres of water to the parched forest. The red gums' health, said council chairman Duncan Malcolm, was far worse than expected.

And, for the first time in Victoria, the report recommended two of these four new national parks be co-managed by the local Aboriginal community.

The final public hearing into the plan is being held in Melbourne on Tuesday, and public submissions to the plan close at the end of the month.

Allega Curr, 21, and her family, who live in Melbourne but maintain connections in the area, say the plan is a chance to fix the mistakes of the past: "Even though Edward Curr wasn't a genocidal monster like a lot of them, he was a person who came up here to steal the land, expand colonial frontiers and make a profit. To see the area made into a national park and co-managed by indigenous people would be a good thing for the whole community, in terms of land use and environmental values."

In his memoir, Recollections of squatting in Victoria, published in 1885, Curr notes a "spreading tree" at Baika Creek (now Brooke Creek) and writes: "I happened to pass these nooks then at that moment, but some camp fires smouldering... and the bags and ruts which hung from its branches showed they were not far away."

Wayne Atkinson stands in the shade of this same tree as white cockatoos tumble through the air, their screeches echoing off the river bank.

Born on the river bank at Moorooma and now a lecturer in Indigenous history and politics at Swinburne University, he says it would be "overwhelming" if the Yorta Yorta and Dja Dja Wurrung's relationship to the land were formalised.

"Our traditional land care practices have been tested over the millennia and should be given full recognition," he says.

But the draft plan has divided farming and timber communities along the river, with the report stating benefits would accrue mostly to people outside the area.

Northern Victoria Nationals MP Dan Pullen says the proposal would "lock up" the forest and end enter industries. "We now have a Victorian Government that is prepared to tackle generational welfare dependency on small towns in regional Victoria, just to satisfy their Green masters," he says.