



Blue Mountains Grammar School

and the Massive Murray Paddle (MMP)



"What I really loved about the Murray River Marathon was having the chance to hang out with new people and try new things."

Evie Johnston, Year 8, 2017

BMGS AND THE MURRAY RIVER – A MASSIVE STORY!

What is it?

The Massive Murray Paddle (MMP) is an amazing annual, five-day, outdoor education adventure and paddling race on the Murray River that aims to 'connect people, river and country'. It's a charity event that raises funds to assist local community driven programs.

The Challenge

Every year since 1968, hundreds of individual kayakers, relay teams, schools and community groups from all over Australia have paddled the Murray River, from Yarrowonga to Swan Hill – 404km over five days.

The event is now held in late November.

Our History

BMGS entered its first relay team in the MMP in 2013 (it was then called the Murray Marathon). The School was encouraged to get involved by Australian kayaking legend, Bill Robinson, through his friendship with BMGS parent Gregg Borschmann. Bill – who has paddled 28 consecutive Murray marathons - donated two TK2 racing kayaks to BMGS. Together with three double ocean kayaks on loan to the school, 24 BMGS students and parents paddled the iconic Murray event in our first year.

In 2016, the School entered a record team of 20 students and 20 adults. The students were mainly from Years 7-9, with leadership support from students in Years 10-11. The 2016 BMGS team also had the privilege of being joined by Murray Marathon founder Mark Thornthwaite and journalist Ricky French, who wrote a feature article on the event and BMGS participation for *WILD Magazine* in January, 2017 (see pages 6 and 7).

How do we do it?

BMGS' involvement in the MMP is parent driven with strong support from the School, including the participation of at least one supervising teacher.

Most of our paddlers have no experience - but everyone has fun and we all learn a lot about ourselves, and each other.

Each day on the river is split into four legs. A normal day's kayaking for a relay paddler is one leg of 20-30 km. It takes about 2-3 hours (depending on how fast the river is flowing and how fast the crew are paddling!). It's a challenge – but not impossible, even for a novice! We paddle past tall river redgums, quiet billabongs and sweeping bends, then have flocks of screeching cockatoos for company. Each evening, we camp at beautiful riverside locations along the way.

Our Craft

For our first years, we relied on borrowed boats. In 2016, the BMGS Paddlers Group raised funds to buy two Australian built Mirage 730 double ocean kayaks. The kayaks were then donated to the school for paddling events like the MMP and the BMGS Outdoor Education program.

"The marathon is not just a race, it's an experience, one you will never forget because it becomes part of you."

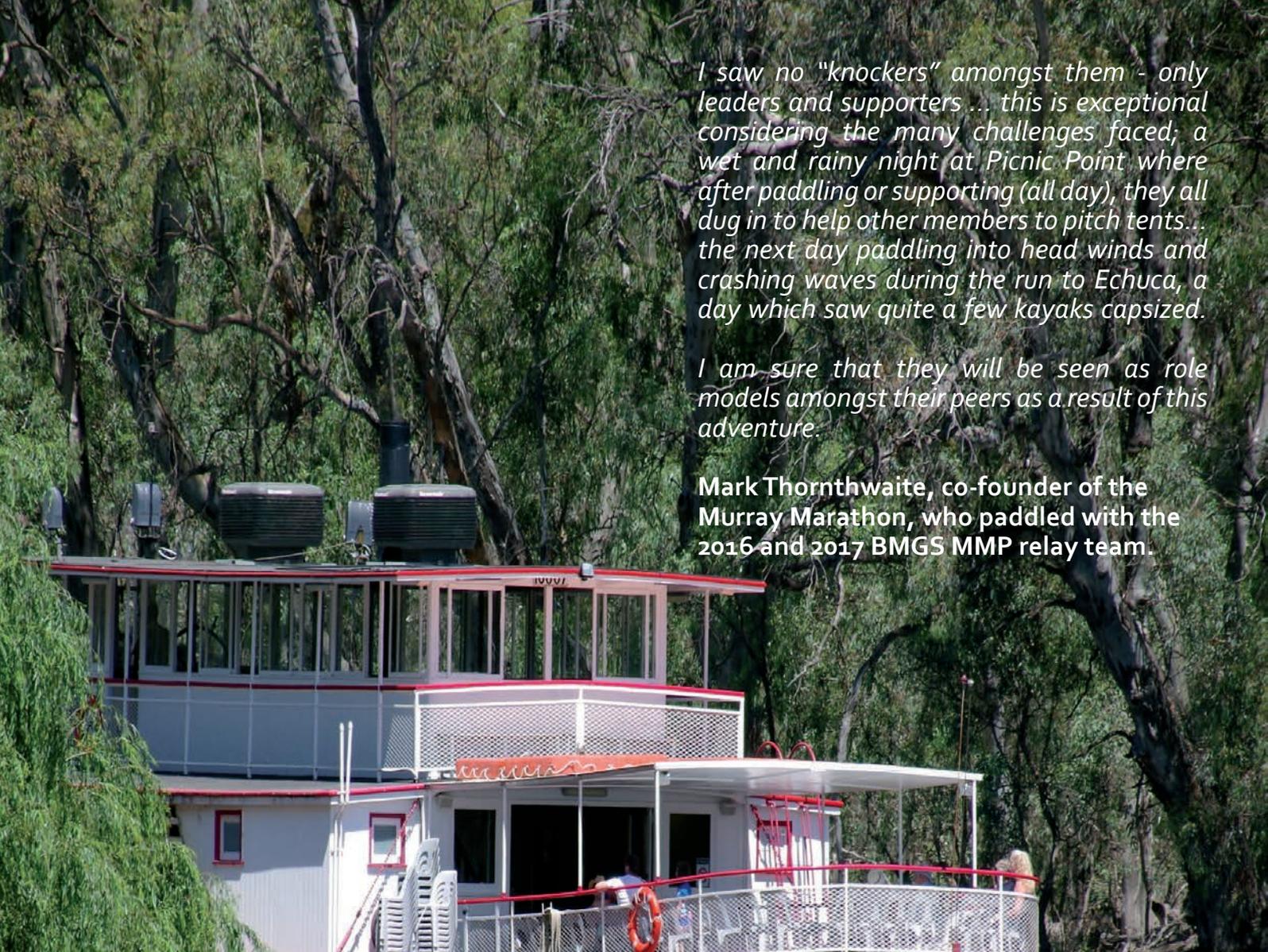
Peter Phillips, former coach, St. Joseph's College kayaking team

Together with craft that are loaned every year to the school by parents Heather McNair and Gregg Borschmann and BMGS paddling mentor, Bill Robinson, BMGS now has access to a fleet of more than eight double and single kayaks for the MMP and other similar events.

I saw no "knockers" amongst them - only leaders and supporters ... this is exceptional considering the many challenges faced; a wet and rainy night at Picnic Point where after paddling or supporting (all day), they all dug in to help other members to pitch tents... the next day paddling into head winds and crashing waves during the run to Echuca, a day which saw quite a few kayaks capsized.

I am sure that they will be seen as role models amongst their peers as a result of this adventure.

Mark Thornthwaite, co-founder of the Murray Marathon, who paddled with the 2016 and 2017 BMGS MMP relay team.



"After you finish your day of rowing it is pure relief until you realize you're soaking wet, caked in mud and there are no showers. But there were some showers, and they were beautiful. It was also fun rowing with other people and hanging out at the campsites."

Rohan Grant-Dawes, Year 9, 2017



In Spring in the lead-up to the event, we use all the craft to train on Wentworth Falls Lake and other venues. This gets paddlers familiar with the kayaks and paddling.

Our boats are fast, stable and safe – and the MMP has an enviable record for its safety protocols.

In 2016, the School, with the generous assistance of a School parent, George Vergotis, refurbished the BMGS trailer so that it could transport the longer ocean kayaks. In 2016 and 2017, the trailer and our fleet of boats were co-ordinated by our volunteer land crew manager, retired senior school teacher Andrew Davies.

BMGS Outdoor Education

The BMGS Strategic Plan recognises the School's uniquely privileged place in a World Heritage National Park, and the importance of the School's Outdoor Education program to enhance student learning, wellbeing and leadership.

The MMP is a safe, challenging and fully supported external school initiative which leads into and complements the BMGS Wilderness Education elective.



"The Massive Murray Paddle showcases so much of the great Australian spirit and environment ... I know from my regular paddles on Sydney Harbour that kayaking is a wonderful way to keep fit and enjoy the outdoors."

The Hon Malcolm Turnbull, Prime Minister of Australia, 2016

Rolling on the river

This year's Massive Murray Paddle event featured characters and excitement in equal measure, *Ricky French* reports

The trick is to not allow yourself to get turned sideways. From our boat we can't tell if there's anyone in the kayak up ahead, bobbing parallel to the waves. It's day three of the Massive Murray Paddle, about 15 kilometres from the port of Echuca, and things are about to get desperate.

Surging wind gusts rake the normally benign Murray into a mean chop. Paddling is like riding a pushbike uphill over a severely corrugated road. From the front seat of our Mirage 730 kayak I take the full force as we rush over to assist. My partner Mark Thornthwaite sits behind and shouts at the back of my head, "Dig in, Ricky! Dig in!"

Tired as I am, I do what Mark says. Mark is the reason I'm here. In fact, he's the reason every one of the 340 paddlers is here. But now's not the time to consider history, there's a boat to get to.

"Do you see anyone inside?" Mark shouts. "No!" I yell back.

The waves pummel and it feels like we're being forced backwards, but we finally reach the stricken craft. It's flooded, it bobs lifeless, looking deflated and defeated. Its crew are in the water, one at either end, holding on for dear life and trying in vain to drag both themselves and the boat to shore. I recognise the familiar red of the team uniforms. Dungulayin Mileka, or 'Blues and Brothers,' whose members comprise at-risk Aboriginal teenagers and local police officers. The team was created to foster bonds, repair relationships and encourage teamwork. If there was ever a call for it, it was now.

Mark takes charge. He pulls our kayak up alongside and shouts, "Grab our back handle as we go past!" There's a sudden jerk of weight as the cop does as instructed. We dig in and paddle hard but it's like towing an elephant carcass through mud. Finally we reach a floating pontoon and the two shipwrecked kayakers haul themselves up as Mark and I tether their kayak. The guys are silent and shivering. Probably shell-shocked.

I'm about to start making phone calls to get them picked up by the rescue boat but Mark has other ideas. He says to the cop: "Give me a hand to tip the water out of your boat. We'll soon get you guys back in and on your way."

It's natural that Mark Thornthwaite would want to send the pair on their way. He sent the whole event on its way back in 1969, when at age 21 he got the idea to paddle the Murray, 404 kilometres between Yarrowonga and Swan Hill as a way to raise funds for the Red Cross. Almost from the start, things didn't go to plan.

His paddling partner pulled out on the second day, leaving Mark to battle on alone. On the third day he did his shoulder and wrist battling high winds. The support boat pulled him off the water and took him to hospital in Echuca. He was treated and discharged the next day, and was allowed to finish the event, paddling into Swan Hill and in the process into Australian flat-water history. But the disappointment of not making the whole journey still gnaws away, and it stimulates him to motivate everyone to push on, to do the very best they can.

48 years later the event is still going strong. Records and line honours are hotly contested, even if the official mantra is for a social, fundraising paddle. This year sees 340 paddlers and 84 teams. I've joined up with Blue Mountains Grammar School, and I'm a little nervous.

For a start, I've done bugger-all training. One paddle, in fact; a leisurely two hour float down the Goulburn River with kayaking legend Bill Robinson. Bill has been instrumental in keeping the event going, in forging connections between people and spreading the good word. He's probably paddled more kilometres on the Murray than any other person, and it's his 27th year paddling the event.

New organiser Shannon O'Brien says he's looking forward to building the event up to what it once was. "We want to encourage as many beginners and intermediate kayakers to get out there, raise some money and give it

a go." After being run as a fundraiser for the Red Cross for 40 years, and then the YMCA for eight, this is the first time participants can choose where their fundraising dollars go. By the time day one in rolled round I had fundraised exactly \$194 for Victoria Police, owing to a speeding fine dished out while driving to Bill Robinson's place in Nagambie.

Our team is doing the paddle in relays, with each of our 41 members paddling one leg a day. It's at the checkpoints where you meet the other teams and get immersed in the atmosphere of the event. Old friends hug and slap backs, familiar faces are greeted fondly and new faces are welcomed. Many have been paddling the event for decades, including Tony Hewish, who first did it in 1970. "The paddling keeps me alive," he says. "It gives me an incentive to keep fit."

Possibly the most striking and beautiful boats is a hand-made wooden Canadian-style canoe, made by John Enfantie, a member of Tasmanian team 'Old Tassie Devils.' John built the boat from Huon pine, king billy pine, celery top and blackwood. It goes surprisingly well, and always makes an eye-catching arrival to the checkpoints. I'm paddling an Eco-Bezbig belonging to Gregg Borschmann, our fearless and unflappable leader.

Gregg pushes me out onto the Murray and yells one final piece of advice: "If you're going to fall out, wait till you're at least out of sight."

It's hot. The mercury is pushing 40 and there's only moderate respite on the water. My checkpoint at Cobram seems a long way off. Being in a single kayak is lonely. Occasionally another boat slips past, a blur of rotating paddles and a few pleasantries.

But mostly my eyes and mind are focused on the next bend in the river, on keeping the rhythm going and monitoring my body for signs of fatigue (and then trying to block them out).

The motto of the Massive Murray Paddle is 'connecting people, river and country,' and out on the river you really do feel the connection. It's the river, the mighty Murray, or 'Dhungalla', which feeds so much of our country and has such an important spiritual (and practical) history with our indigenous people, that brings us all together. For the Blues and Brothers team it was about using the river as a guiding arrow, setting small goals that lead to bigger ones. Team organiser Tony Lovett says, "It's one cop and one kid in a boat. And you have to work together or you're not going to get anywhere."

The river had brought them together, it provided the setting for both healing and growing. The great hunter Ngurunderi paddled his canoe, familiar faces are greeted fondly and here, chasing the Murray Cod. Ngurunderi caught his fish, the same way that everyone who comes here catches whatever it is they are after. For me, I just want to reach Cobram. I turn my head to watch the trees flash by.

The gums stand on high banks and watch over us like spectators lining the course. I try to estimate how much farther it is and tell myself I'll feel better tomorrow. Finally, mercifully, the saviour of checkpoint C comes into view. I wash up on shore, half expecting a team of men in rescue gear to haul me out of the cabin by my arms and carry me briskly to a waiting ambulance. But instead I'm met by Gregg who says, "Shit, Ricky, you made really good time."

Billy Dunn had an accident. He fell 26 metres onto concrete and his body is held together with titanium. That was 16 years ago. But it hasn't stopped him paddling the Murray. He's done the event 31 times.

He's now 76. He soaks up the atmosphere at checkpoint B on day three, sharing stories with old and new friends, smiling and posing for photographs, eating a ham and cheese

sandwich and slapping at the occasional mosquito. The Country Women's Association is the sharpest and funniest team by a long stretch. "We're looking for a nice, young gentleman to swim to the other side and bring back our kayak," they tell me, adding, "Don't think we won't make you do it." They hold up a sign that says, "Chicks With Attitude." Team DILLIGAF seem to be everywhere.

The anagram, they say, stands for Do I Look Like I Go Awfully Fast? Well, obviously. Long-term race stalwart Michael 'Mad Mick' Dinkgreve is paddling a kayak he made himself entirely out of Colorbond steel. Close observation reveals his secret weapons to be white bread sandwiches and cans of coke. He might be mad, but he's not the only one.

But possibly the best story is the father and son team of Gary and Tyler Creed. They're paddling a canoe built in 1974 that used to belong to Gary's father, before he died two years ago. Gary's refurbished his father's boat and is now paddling it with Tyler. There will be no relays for this remarkable team in their 'Pink Panther' canoe: they're doing the full distance, with Tyler now the youngest person to complete the whole 404 kilometres. Three generations of true blue Murray legends.

Heavy rain has forced the cancellation of day two, so organisers order a repeat of the day one course, proving wrong the maxim that you can never paddle the same river twice. On day three the convoy moves to Picnic Point, deep in the Barmah Forest.

It's an isolated enclave of tents and river gums, with the swollen Murray lapping at our feet. Darkness falls early as the sky blackens.

Late arrivals pitch tents in the rain, while other teams hold meetings around campfires, which sizzle and steam with every raindrop. By the morning the campground is coated in deep mud. The boats jostle for starting position. It's a mad rush for the first hairpin

bend but my main mission is to avoid getting swamped by the flurry of crafts. ("Wait till you're out of sight...")

In the narrow bends of the Barmah Forest the river takes on a racecourse feel. One by one paddlers pass, some heads down and arms whirring, but there are plenty of us just lapping up the beauty of the place, watching the swallows dart across our bows like tiny jet planes, and craning our heads to take in the mighty river red gums, their trunks flooded by the river that spills over its bank and spreads across the forest, pooling into the vast Barmah Lakes.

The pain sets in around the 20-kilometre mark. There are still eight kilometres to go. I haven't seen any other boats for a while but I soon notice a motor boat has come up behind and is tailing me, keeping its distance but always there. My heart sinks a little. I know who it is. It's the ship of shame.

My mind drifts back to the opening ceremony and the world's longest safety briefing. There was something about a sweeper boat that would bring up the rear, and if the last boat didn't reach the next checkpoint in time it would be unceremoniously towed in. "It's known as the ship of shame," Gregg had explained in a meeting. "It's the only boat you don't want to meet on the water."

The last eight kilometres, hounded by the ship of shame, nearly kill me. But the menacing threat of failure keeps me going somehow, and slowly I grind the Eco-Bezhig into the boat ramp at Barmah, where once again Gregg is waiting with a camera. "Smile!" he yells. "King of the Barmah!"

Friday, Swan Hill. It's the end of the line for paddlers in the 48th Massive Murray Paddle. The students of Blue Mountains Grammar School paddle across the finish line together, smoke from an orange flare coating their fleet and giving them the look of an invading force emerging from the jungle, set to ambush. Bill Robinson arrives soon after, his face whitewashed with sun block and satisfaction.

"How do you feel, Bill?" I ask. He looks up from his kayak at the kids paddling into the jetty, their bright faces water-specked and glowing under the Swan Hill sun. He smiles, and when he speaks, he speaks for everyone.

"I feel bloody marvellous."

Ricky French is a writer and columnist from Melbourne. He grew up in New Zealand, where he still returns to regularly, to tramp. A frequent contributor to *Wild*, Ricky is an advocate for improved access to Australia's wild areas for hikers and paddlers of all abilities.

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*Mad Mick takes a break
in his Colourbond boat.*

FROM THE ORGANISERS AND PARTICIPANTS

Friday, Swan Hill. It's the end of the line for paddlers in the 48th Massive Murray Paddle. The students of Blue Mountains Grammar School paddle across the finish line together, smoke from an orange flare coating their fleet and giving them the look of an invading force emerging from the jungle, set to ambush. Bill Robinson arrives soon after, his face whitewashed with sunblock and satisfaction. "How do you feel, Bill?" I ask. He looks up from his kayak at the kids paddling into the jetty, their bright faces water-specked and glowing under the Swan Hill sun. He smiles, and when he speaks, he speaks for everyone. "I feel bloody marvellous."

Ricky French, WILD MAGAZINE, January 2017

Taking control of an event with a 48 year history is a difficult task even when all the stars are aligned. When you have many people pushing you to take different directions, it is almost impossible.

From day one of our management of the MMP we knew that this iconic event is life changing regardless of the direction we took the event.

A few years ago I met some young kids representing BMGS that were young and motivated to succeed and paddled a 7m double kayak for 404km. The paddle that these young kids completed probably changed their lives, however it motivated me to design the future of this great event to assist lots of young kids to succeed. A couple of years down the track and the team from BMGS has proven that youngsters with great mentors can achieve amazing feats.

The kids from BMGS truly understood and absorbed the mantra of the Massive Murray Paddle – Connecting people, river and country.

Shannon O'Brien, Director, Massive Murray Paddle

I have had the great honour to be involved with Blue Mountains Grammar School since 2013 when I came to the school and presented them with two TK2 kayaks that I had restored.

These boats were rather unstable racing craft and I was delighted to be able to lend the school my two Mirage Doubles for the 2013 Murray Marathon . They are very stable and allowed BMGS to have a very positive experience.

I have had the joy of seeing the BMGS students take on all sorts of challenges and I believe that every student has gained a great deal in their physical and emotional development. From my observation of BMGS, I consider that the School is producing some very fine young people.

My daughter Jane is a triple Olympian in the sport of rowing and is the Head of Rowing at a large private girls school in Melbourne and I can see the massive input that the School has to contribute in staff and finance to provide a rowing programme.

I believe that the template being used by BMGS gives the students an experience that is as good or better in my opinion than a rowing programme and at a fraction of the cost.

I am actively promoting what BMGS has done to other schools as I believe that they are leading the way in showing how to get students, staff and parents to challenge themselves and to quote the motto of the Event "Connect with River and Country."

Bill Robinson, BMGS paddling mentor, veteran of 28 Murray Marathons

"It was just fun doing it, and you get to be with your friends for a week."

Oscar Borschmann, Year 12, 2017



FROM OUR PARENTS

The opportunity to learn a new skill, bond with a group of supportive, enthusiastic parents, children and teachers who have a love for the outdoors as well as spend some quality time paddling, driving and camping with my own child was immeasurable.

Kane developed his resilience (the first few days paddling were hard but he stuck with it), made new friends from BMGS as well as had several interactions with significant adult role models. You can't buy that sort of stuff! 5 stars.

Katrina Molla (parent, Kane, Year 8, 2017)

One of the most impressive aspects of BMGS is the commitment to the wholistic education of the child. I am acutely aware that I am raising a human being, not an ATAR result. That wholistic approach to education is even more important in this day and age given the increase in mental health concerns during adolescence.

The Wilderness Education elective is, in my opinion the most valuable subject the school offers for the development of the child and due to the popularity of the elective, I am certain that this is what parents are looking for in the education of their children.

This is quite possibly the most wonderful external program that the school has been involved with. The BMGS team ensured that the kids were all in the kayaks for the final leg to cross the finish line. They were dirty and tired, yet elated and "10 feet tall."

What I found as an observer was a group of school families who had come together to accomplish an incredible feat. The week is challenging, with minimal sleep, exposure to the elements, limited hygiene facilities and eating where you can find a place to "grab a bite" on the road. The bond and friendship that developed between the children and their accompanying parent was profoundly evident and this also extended to the entire group, having lived, travelled, supported and paddled together during the previous week.

Ainslie Hines, (parent, William, Year 10, 2017)



"A great team event with plenty of challenges for students and parents being forced out of their comfort zone (on land as well as on the river!) Not only does it benefit those who participate, but it can be seen as yet another activity that differentiates and promotes the School with the added charity raising ethos."

Duncan Barrell, paddling parent and Chair, BMGS Parents & Friends' Assoc.



At Blue Mountains Grammar School, we're keenly aware of the value of outdoor education and Australia's natural environment.

In addition to our School-based programs that make regular use of the Blue Mountains World Heritage Area, BMGS has been involved in the Massive Murray Paddle for several years.

The MMP is a fantastic event that provides a great adventure for our students in a dynamic environment along Australia's Murray River. Our students learn about their country and themselves as they take on a personal challenge, accept responsibility, collaborate with others and have fun whilst having a go. They also raise funds to assist with local community programs and projects.

They're all great outcomes.

Trevor Barman, Headmaster, BMGS



"The Massive Murray Paddle connects all the dots ... growing respect and resilience for individuals, families, school and community while also encouraging a knowledge and love of country."

Heather McNair, Gregg Borschmann, Richard Delaney, Founders, BMGS Paddlers

The Massive Murray Paddle is held each year in November.
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