

Waterkeepers' Claims Sunk by Facts

Alan Moran & Mike Nahan

In late 2004, Melbourne's *The Age* newspaper gave considerable publicity to the supposed 'Parlous state of the Yarra River'. Articles headed 'Our sick river' and 'It's time to put the needs of the Yarra first' bled ink into the majestic waterway's swirling eddies. The campaign was joined by breathless *Age* reporters and 'authorities' as diverse as politicians on both sides of the State Parliament. One major player was 'the President of the Yarra Riverkeepers'.

Oddly enough, there has been little data accompanying these claims. Nobody making them wanted to spoil a good story about Man's unfettered ability to destroy things of grace and beauty or to pass up an opportunity to bash the State's activist environment minister for not being 'green' enough.

The campaign prompted Melbourne Water to put on their Website the measurements they have conducted over many years of the *E. coli* levels at

In the case of E. coli levels in the Yarra, on average, last year, these were one-eighth of their levels of 1974 and less than half the levels of the early 1990s.

various places along the river.

It will come as no great surprise to those who have taken a serious interest in the river's health that it is extensively monitored and has shown substantial improvement over decades. Indeed the Yarra is monitored daily at 72 sites for over 20 different pollutants. The records, which are readily available show, improvement for all pollutants and are the

result of extensive efforts government, business and the community.

In the case of *E. coli* levels in the Yarra, on average, last year, these were one-eighth of their levels of 1974 and less than half the levels of the early 1990s.

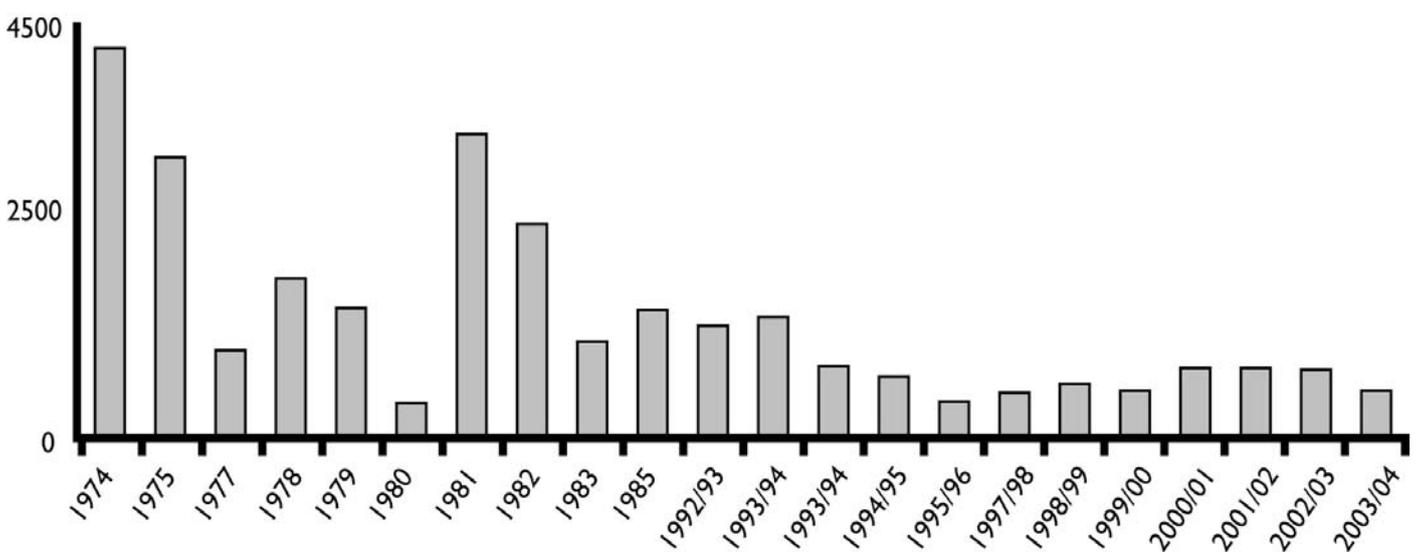
The chart below illustrates the trends.

Melbourne Water itself, in spite of its highly conservative stance and its reluctance to comment on the health and safety of the river, was moved to say on its website:

Over the past 20 years, however, there has been a general improvement in the river's water quality resulting from the increased sewerage of catchments and the diversion of industrial discharges into the sewerage system.

In addition to water quality

Geometric means of *E. coli* counts (per 100 ml) at Princes Bridge



Source: Melbourne Water, http://www.melbournwater.com.au/images/news/yarra_ecoli_2.jpg

improvements in the Yarra River, other significant environmental changes in recent times are the wider distribution of platypus and a range of migratory native fish species. Platypus, are now known to occur in the Yarra River at Kew, less than 10 kilometres from the city centre.

As the data is so conclusive, it is a matter of concern that a beat-up could be engineered and that *The Age* could have found it attractive and credible enough to give it prominence.

How did this happen? Thank glibble philanthropists, greedy scientists, populist politicians and journalists being manipulated by job-seeking Ludites.

The sting was the work of the new Waterkeepers Alliance—a venture modelled on the US operation of the same name (see ‘The Waterkeepers’, *IPA Review*, Vol. 56, No. 1, 2004, pages 8–9).

The Waterkeepers cherry-picked the dataset, selecting samples that contained high *E. coli* counts, combined them with reports that a kayaker had fallen sick, found sympathetic arms of the media to run the story that the river was being ‘rooned’, that there was a conspiracy of silence by the regulators and that they the Waterkeepers—were here to save it.

Apart from Melbourne Water, no scientist publicly exposed the bias. Politicians made public laments about the demise of this iconic river and promised to do more. No mention was made of the significant improvements to environmental quality in recent years, the \$22.5 million investment over the last three years to reduce the big problem of storm water contamination, the detailed monitoring of the river, the ready and full availability of the data on river quality (see www.vicwaterdat.net); the extensive community involvement in the monitoring and management of the river (see www.vic.waterwatch.org.au and www.clearwater.asn.au).

There is no question that the river

can and should be improved. However the Waterkeepers added nothing but fear and misinformation. Indeed in the pursuit of money and influence, they undermine the very real work undertaken by hundreds of people, groups, businesses and government bodies over the years and who, in the end, will do the work of protecting the river.

This was not The Waterkeepers’ only campaign. They also joined in

*Apart from
Melbourne Water,
no scientist
publicly exposed
the bias.*

a campaign with the Environmental Defender Office (EDO) against a proposed broiler shed in the Shire of Cardinia. Why this chicken farm? Their claim is that the shed will be built in an area subject to inundation. However, Melbourne Water—which assessed the proposal, suggested improvements and approved the proposal after its recommendations were accepted by the proponents—stated that the site is outside the flood plain and safe from a one-in-

a-hundred years’ flood.

The reality is that the Waterkeepers Alliance, like its US model, was established to link and unite NIMBYs and tort lawyers against modern agriculture. The US Waterkeepers focus on suing large pork farmers. However, there are none of these in Victoria, so it chose the closest thing, a large broiler farm. It did so by linking people who live next to the proposed chicken farm, and who wish to stop the project, with the activist lawyers and the EDO to stop the proposal in the Victorian planning courts.

This raises several questions. How could such a body, that clearly seeks to put additional barrier to the development of modern agriculture, gather the funding to undertake its activities? It turns out that seed funding was provided by apparently sensible, pro-business philanthropists. Have the custodians of these foundations been asleep on their watches? And finally, how much public support, financial and otherwise, has been extended to supporting this and other similar bodies?

Alan Moran is Director, Deregulation Unit, at the Institute of Public Affairs.

Mike Nahan is Executive Director of the Institute of Public Affairs.

IPA

Strange Times

Better than Haggis

The deep-fried Mars bar, a nutritionist’s nightmare that surfaced in Scotland about a decade ago, is now an established part of the Scottish culinary scene, according to a letter published in *The Lancet*. The average sale is 23 bars per fish and chip shop per week, but some shops say they sell up to 200 a week, it records. Scotland is already ranked as the country with the highest rate of chronic heart disease in Western Europe, a position that owes itself to cigarettes and alcohol as well as a poor diet and a love of sugary foods. Critics should take heart, though. The Mediterranean diet is penetrating into Scotland ... albeit in the form of deep-fried pizza.