

# From the Editor

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The Murray-Darling Basin is shaping up to be the next big environmental battleground.

Interest in the Murray River is neither new nor surprising. The Murray ranks with the Great Barrier Reef as one of the nation's most important environmental assets and has played a unique role in our economic, cultural and political life.

Historically, it has been perceived predominantly as an economic asset, to be harnessed for irrigating agriculture, generating electricity, fostering tourism and providing transport.

Accordingly, since European settlement, it has been radically changed to a 'working river'. Its natural flow, which was once highly irregular—alternately flooding a great deal of Victoria and then drying to a series of linked ponds—has been controlled with dams and weirs, benefiting boaters and anglers as well as agriculture. It now flows to the ocean, even in times of one-in-a-hundred year droughts such as have been experienced over the last few years. During such droughts, in its native state, the river would have stopped flowing at around Cahuna.

The Australian public's perception and values have now changed 180 degrees. Environmental values now dominate discourse. The demand is to return the river to a more natural state by taking water from agriculture to increase environmental flows.

The Council of Australian Governments plans to meet in October to decide not whether to increase environmental flows, but by



how much and over what time span.

In his 2003 Budget speech in reply, Simon Crean jumped on the save-the-Murray bandwagon, pledging to return 1,500 gegalitres to the environment. He made no mention of the impact that removing 20 per cent of irrigators' water would have on them and their communities. Nor did he mention compensation for the removal of these water rights. Even some Liberals have felt obliged to respond. Treasurer Costello recently threatened to penalize the States by withholding competition payments unless they embarked on reforms that included reducing irrigators' diversions for environmental flows. The farmers and the communities that they support are, at best, given passing notice.

The politicians are not alone. Indeed, it seems that everyone, like the proverbial Hanrahan, is chanting in unison, 'We'll all be rooned, before the year is out'.

What is going on? The Greens have apparently latched on to the River as another ecological icon to be saved from the destructive forces of modernity.

The Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) under the leadership of Tim Fisher, their Water Campaigner, took the early lead. Together, they have done a truly remarkable job in convincing the public, in particular the great and the good, that the River and modern agriculture in general, are unsustainable. The ACF has become the 'representative stakeholder' on water issues to governments, research bodies, the farm lobby, philanthropic foundations and businesses. Mr Fisher has got himself ensconced on the Myer Foundation's water and environment committee, which gave \$677,700 in grants in 2002 to 25 NGOs—including the ACF—to help save the River and the land. Mr Fisher is on the board of the Land and Water Rural Research Development Corporation (LWRRDC) which, with \$24 million of mostly taxpayers' money, is the leading funding body of research on land and water issues. Considering that Mr Fisher has an Arts degree and no scientific or technical expertise in relevant areas, this is a significant feat.

One of the ACF's most influential ventures was the report *National Investment in Rural Landscapes*, published in 2000, jointly promoted with the National Farmers Federation and funded by the LWRRDC. Although this report dwelt generally on salinity, it focused heavily on the Murray, and claimed that the river was an ecological disaster. It sought \$65 billion over ten years to 'save' the Murray and transform the agricultural sector around Australia generally.

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The ACF's arguments were subsequently rehashed in a study undertaken in a 2001 report, *Repairing the Country*, by the Allens Consulting Group, with guidance from ACF and funding from a range of banks and companies.

More recently, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), under the guise of the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists, joined the campaign to save the River. It issued a report in late 2002 (critically examined by Alan Moran in the December 2002 issue of the *IPA Review*) which largely echoed ACF's chorus of gloom. All these reports were remarkably short on data and detail. They look and read like public relations documents.

Along the way, no-one has demanded that they justify their diagnosis. Indeed, few scientists or economists have, at least publicly, criticized the claims. Most interested parties, including sections of the farm lobby, CSIRO, bureaucrats and politicians, have followed the Green piper's tune as if in a trance.

One possible reason for the silence is the apparent lack of data. The body responsible for monitoring the health of the river, the Murray Darling Basin Commission (MDBC), has published limited hard data. Indeed, the first comprehensive audit of the River's ecological conditions is now under way. Moreover, the only pollutant for which there appear to be good data is salt.

The latest Report of the River Murray Scientific Panel on Environmental Flows states 'there is limited information upon which to make quantitative links between hydrology and the ecological health of the river and the floodplain...' and 'Knowledge of [the] species ecology is woefully defective in many key areas and is hampered by lack of historical information'.

If this is the case, what is the basis for the doom and gloom?

In this edition of the *Review*, scientist Jennifer Marohasy (*Where's the data?*, page 4)—who joined the IPA this month as Director of the Institute's Environment Unit—begins the task of examining the data behind the claims. The obstacles and difficulties she faced when conducting her search should be a cause for concern to anyone interested in the River, its communities and good public policy.

Not only do the data not support the received claims, they show that salinity in the River over the last two decades has actually improved—at least at Morgan (an important indicator site where Adelaide extracts its drinking water). The received data also bring into question the MDBC's own projections which suggest that while the River may have improved in recent years, it is set to deteriorate sharply.

Care must be taken in drawing conclusions on the basis of the available data. The data set is limited, and more might in fact be available in the deeper recesses of the MDBC and CSIRO. More and better data, it appears, will become available in the near future as a result of the audit currently under way.

Even so, the fact that the available data are at odds not only with public perceptions, but also with the pronouncements of official agencies and the experts, indicates that something is seriously amiss.

The gulf between belief and fact on this issue will not surprise the experienced observer. It is standard Green practice to manufacture problems to support their beliefs with a selective presentation of facts or, if necessary, no facts at all. The surprise lies with the apparent wholesale failure of the many groups involved—those on which we have come to rely to counter Green propaganda.

Why, for example, has the NFF—the nation's leading farmer lobby group—so willingly joined the ACF campaign? They know full well that the ACF is one of the most one-eyed critics of modern agriculture; it seeks to ban agricultural biotechnology—a technology which offers great potential for dealing with salinity issues—and has no respect for property rights.

Why would land and water scientists in LVRDC and CSIRO embrace the ACF and WWF in such blind rapture? Although established to drum up funding for scientific research, the WWF has long taken an anti-scientific path.

I suspect that both the farmers and the scientists have succumbed to the promise of buckets of easy government money. The Greens' plan is to Europeanise the farm sector. This has great appeal to some farmers. It would mean not only large government subsidies, but an infinitely easier life, as there would be no need to worry about being more productive or attuned to heartless markets.

The Green plan for co-operative scientists is even more enticing. They, along with the Greens of course, are to be put in charge of the whole grand plan—deciding which activity is good and which is bad, overseeing land-use plans, allocating funding and levying fines, and of course deciding research funding.

But, co-operating with the Greens brings big risks. For the farmers, it means becoming totally dependent on government and Green largesse. For the scientists, it means, well, giving up being a scientist.

I suspect that the decision turns on whether the farmers and scientists believe that the Greens can deliver the billions of dollars promised.

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