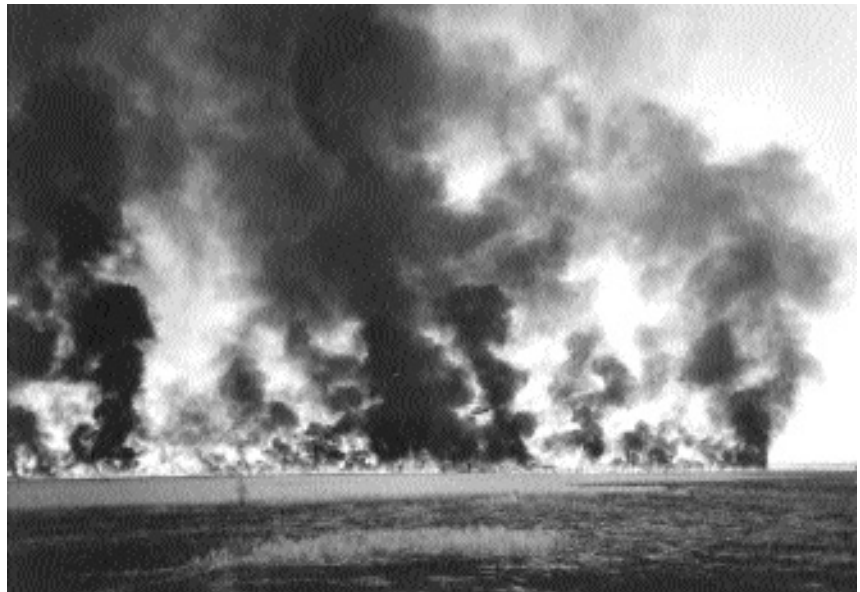


Wetlands in Crisis

The inland wetlands of New South Wales are on the brink of ecological catastrophe. The images are heart-breaking – thousands of hectares of burnt reedbeds in the Macquarie Marshes, centuries-old red gums dropping their leaves and dying on the Murray floodplain, crushed eggshells in the desiccated Gwydir Wetlands. This year's waterbird counts were the lowest on record, by far.



Flames races across the reed beds of the Macquarie Marshes as fire-fighters work to contain the damage. Photo by John Lewis.

For years the signs of ecological decline in our inland wetlands have been there for all to see, but not since the Darling River blue-green algae outbreak in 1991 has the crisis in our inland waterways been so obvious. In this story, we focus on three tragedies from the first half of this year: the fire in the Macquarie Marshes, the failure of a large straw-necked ibis breeding event in the Gwydir Wetlands, and the release of a scientific report showing that over 75% of all river red gums on the lower Murray are stressed from lack of water. But as depressing as these stories are, even more depressing is the thought that they are duplicated, in other ways but with similar

outcomes, in hundreds of smaller wetlands across the Murray-Darling Basin.

* * *

The second week of December brought a rare sight to the Gwydir Valley: storm clouds and heavy, sustained rain. Between 9 and 11 December, over 25 cm fell in areas around Moree. The river rose and topped the banks, floodrunners ran, roads were cut.

And the birds returned. Thousands of straw-necked ibis and egrets settled in the wetlands. For the ibis, it was the first time since 1999. Local landholders and wetlands experts, seeing an opportunity for a

significant breeding event, notified the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources (DIPNR) to prepare to release environmental flows in volumes of 200 to 400 ML per day to sustain the breeding.

The last week of December, the birds began to breed. On 13 January, DIPNR announced an environmental flow release, but the initial flow was only 75 ML per day rather than the recommended 200 ML plus. It was not enough. On 20 January, a local landholder visited the site to find it abandoned by the ibis, the ground around the nests dry and littered with broken ibis eggs.

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Subsequently DIPNR increased the flow to 250 ML per day, and the egrets remained to successfully breed. The government is investigating internally, but to date it has not been made clear why 75 ML per day was released instead of the amounts recommended for a successful breeding event. The government has not announced whether it would make the results of its investigation public.

* * *

On 23 January a storm hit the Macquarie Marshes, but instead of bringing desperately needed flooding rains the storm brought fire. A lightning strike ignited a wildfire in the main reed beds of the Macquarie Marshes Nature Reserve, which had been dry for an unprecedented four years. The reeds were dry, stunted and very susceptible to burning.

The fire ultimately burned 2500 hectares. Without the tremendous efforts of the fire-fighting crews, the damage could have been even worse.

As it is, the fire may have major adverse ecological consequences. Fire-damaged river red gums may die. After suffering their second major burn in four years, the reed beds may have difficulty regenerating. Even taking the most hopeful view, this fire is yet another obstacle to overcome in the fight to return the Macquarie Marshes to health.

* * *

In late-2002 the states of New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia assessed the health of river red gums and black box at 100 sites between Wentworth, NSW and Renmark, SA. The results were worrying, with over 50% of all trees surveyed considered stressed.

In March and May 2004 the Murray-Darling Basin Commission repeated the 2002 survey and assessed tree health at an additional 55 sites upstream and downstream of the original study. This time the results were shocking. Over 75% of all trees surveyed were stressed. At some sites as many as 95% of all red gums exhibited signs of stress and as many as 85% of black box. The location of the stressed trees indicates that the decline in health is the result of lack of flooding due to river regulation combined with drought.

The implications for the Murray ecosystems are frightening. The study concludes that floodplain trees along a large portion of the Murray are at risk of permanent loss. Large-scale tree loss would alter the nutrient cycle that Murray River fish and waterbirds rely on, leading to additional losses of flora and fauna. The ecological character of the Murray as a whole could be irrevocably altered.

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Editor's Note

Shattered egg shells are all that remains after thousands of ibis abandoned their nests due to lack of water



Photo by Richard Kingsford

Wetlands, as we all know, are vital to us. We are familiar with the ecological functions they perform: improving water quality, reducing flood impacts, providing habitat, forming nurseries for fish, birds and invertebrates.

Wetlands are also important for recreational activities such as canoeing, bird-watching and angling. They are good places for quiet reflection.

More than ever, as this issue's cover story shows, our inland wetlands are in trouble. After years without significant rains, it would be tempting and easy to blame this all on the drought. But it would be wrong.

Drought did not cause the human error that led to insufficient flows to sustain this year's ibis breeding event in the Gwydir Wetlands. The Macquarie Marshes have always experienced periodic wildfires, but since large-scale irrigation, fires have increased dramatically in frequency and intensity. Drought-related red gum decline along the Murray has occurred before, but this year's MDBC red gum report concludes that increased irrigation activities and diversions could prevent the recovery that has occurred in the past.

There is no escaping that over-extraction and poor water management are responsible for the decline of inland wetlands. But while the bad news is that we are responsible for ecological decline, it is also the

good news: we can reverse over-extraction by recovering water and devoting it to the environment, and we can improve our management practices. The time to start is now, before it's too late.

* * *

By the time you receive this issue of the IRN News, I will have moved on from IRN after the better part of two years, and IRN will be in the process of beginning a new chapter in its history with a new coordinator. For me, as someone new not just to the Australian environment movement but to Australia itself, IRN has been more than a job. In important ways, it has been a lens through which I view my adopted country and its environment.

Not everything I've seen through that lens is pleasant; this issue's stories show that plainly enough. But what gives me and every other conservationist hope is the sheer number of determined, talented and tireless people who care about our environment. I've had the pleasure of working with many of you here at IRN. Thanks to all of you, from the environmentalists who've fired me up, to the graziers who have shared their stories, to the irrigators who have taken the time to show their properties. You've made it a great couple of years.

Brendan Fletcher

Focus on Wetlands

NSW Ramsar Managers Network – Private Landholders Conserving Wetlands

by Dr Robyn Molsher, Ramsar Managers Network Coordinator for the Department of Environment and Conservation NSW

The NSW Ramsar Managers Network (RMN) is a group of private and government representatives involved in the management of Ramsar wetlands in New South Wales. The group was established by the Minister for the Environment in September 2003 to address increasing concerns from private Ramsar managers that their commitment to conservation was not being adequately recognised by government. In the last two years the Ramsar Managers Network has made good progress in raising the profile of Ramsar wetlands in NSW and helping Ramsar to achieve its potential on private land.

NSW leads Australia with its number of private Ramsar sites, with four of its eleven sites occurring wholly or partly on private or community managed land. These include Gwydir Wetlands, Wilgara Wetland, Fivebough and Tuckerbil Swamps, and Shortland Wetlands. The Ramsar Managers Network provides a link to relevant resources and government departments and assists private Ramsar managers develop solutions to identified problems. The Ramsar Managers Network comprises representatives from the four private Ramsar sites in NSW; Department of Environment and Conservation NSW (DEC); Forestry NSW; the Commonwealth Department of Environment and Heritage; Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources NSW (DIPNR) and WWF Australia.

There are three main issues that face Ramsar managers; these vary in relative importance from site to site:

1. *Water* – Wetlands need adequate and appropriately managed shares of available water.
2. *Funding* – Site managers need increased support and access to funding for identified management actions.
3. *Weeds* – Greater support is required for the control of lippia, alligator weed and hyacinth.

Since establishment, the Ramsar Managers Network has been consistently increasing its level of activity and launching or supporting new projects. The following are the network's key activities to date:

- **November 2003** – The inaugural meeting was held in Dubbo. Ramsar Managers Network members and key stakeholders met to identify issues facing private Ramsar managers and developed actions to address them.



Ramsar Managers Network field trip October 2004. Participants included NSW private Ramsar managers and Government representatives as well as nine private Ramsar/wetland managers from across Australia. Photo courtesy of NSW DEC

- **June 2004** – The second Ramsar Managers Network meeting in Dubbo discussed progress to date on actions to assist Ramsar achieve its potential on private land.
- **July 2004** – Natural Heritage Trust funding (\$203,000) was obtained for
 1. the NSW Ramsar Wetlands Communications Program (see accompanying article at right)
 2. ecological character descriptions for each of the four private Ramsar sites.
- **August 2004** – The DEC established a major project team to develop short, medium and long-term strategies for wetland conservation.
- **September 2004** – The DEC and DIPNR began working together on the Water for Wetlands projects, focussing on the Macquarie Marshes and Gwydir Wetlands.
- **October 2004** – The annual field trip and third Ramsar Managers Network meeting was held. Thirty-three participants visited Fivebough-Tuckerbil and Central Murray State Forest Ramsar sites on a three-day bus tour and discussed Ramsar/wetland related issues. Nine private Ramsar/wetland managers from throughout Australia also attended along with NSW private Ramsar managers and government representatives.
- **April 2005** – Ramsar presentations were made to relevant Catchment Management Authorities and government/community site tours of three of the private Ramsar sites were held.
- **May 2005** – The fourth Ramsar Managers Network meeting was held in Dubbo.

For further information about the Ramsar Managers Network contact Robyn Molsher on (02) 6883 5338 or robyn.molsher@environment.nsw.gov.au.

Focus on Wetlands

Who Cares About Our Wetlands? – A Project of the Ramsar Managers Network

By Leanne Cherry, Project Officer for the Ramsar Wetlands Communications Program

Wetlands are like the kidneys of our environment. They store water and improve our water quality to ensure a vital habitat is provided for millions of animals and plants. Without wetlands these animals and plants will die of thirst and those natural landscapes lost forever.

The launch of the NSW Ramsar Wetlands Communications Program (RWCP) on World Wetlands Day 2005 marked the anniversary of the signing of the Ramsar Convention and celebrated the official launch of the Ramsar Wetlands Communications Program – a program aimed at creating a greater sense of appreciation and priority for these important wetlands.

The Ramsar Wetlands Communications Program was developed as an initiative of the NSW Ramsar Managers Network. This network identified the need to increase the awareness of wetlands in general and of the Ramsar Convention. Funds were provided through the Australian Government's Natural Heritage Trust Program, and the program has been coordinated by The Wetlands Centre Australia since July 2004.

Those who know wetlands truly appreciate their value as ecosystems as well as their social, aesthetic and economic values. They appreciate the need to look after these complex and fragile areas. They understand that the healthy functioning of wetlands affects our water quality, food sources, quality of life and landscape beauty.

Unfortunately research tells us that those who appreciate wetlands are in the minority. Communication and education have therefore become important tools to generate more positive attitudes and actions in relation to wetlands.

Over the last 10 months, the Ramsar Wetlands Communications Program has been instrumental in increasing the level of communication and education for wetlands and the Ramsar Convention itself. 'Who Cares About Our Wetlands?' was the question posed as part of the research phase of the Ramsar Wetlands Communications Program. It involved up to 400 people to reveal current levels of awareness within the community and government on the role of wetlands and the Ramsar Convention within our environment. The sample represented those who do come into contact with wetlands and wetlands issues, and those who do not.

The research process involved online surveys, community surveys, telephone interviews, focus groups and a desktop information review. This collection of baseline data allowed the program to identify the level of awareness and understanding stakeholders have for the Ramsar Convention and wetlands generally, which was then fed into the 'Who Cares About Our Wetlands?' research report, and in turn to the development of the



The launch of the NSW Ramsar Wetlands Communications Program. L-R: Tara Ure, CEO, The Wetlands Centre; Claire Carlton, NSW Biodiversity Facilitator, Natural Heritage Trust; and Leanne Cherry, Project Officer, Ramsar Wetlands Communications Program.

Photo courtesy of The Wetlands Centre.

communications program (both resources available at www.wetlands.org.au/WhoCaresAboutOurWetlands).

Using the information identified throughout the research process, the communications program was developed on real – rather than perceived – levels of awareness of wetlands and the Ramsar Convention. This research will also be highly valuable to other organisations looking to develop wetland-related tools, research, marketing campaigns or educational products.

There have been a range of interesting findings from the research. People placed particular value on the social and aesthetic elements of wetlands, with birds regarded as one of the prominent animals associated with wetlands. Communication about wetlands is considered fair, with a low understanding in communities about the role of wetlands and varied understanding in government sectors. Many government officers have heard of the Ramsar Convention, but there was virtually no awareness of the convention within the broader community.

These findings are important for wetland managers and educators across NSW. They highlight some of the best ways to communicate wetland values and paint a picture of current levels of awareness that education activities may build upon.

Activities that have been identified throughout the Ramsar Wetlands Communications Program and implemented to date include website enhancement, a media campaign, brochures, presentations, site tours and other activities. Funds to progress this project beyond year one have now been secured, providing an excellent opportunity to build upon the successes to date.

If you are interested in learning more about the Ramsar Wetlands Communications Program, please forward your email details to ramsar@wetlands.org.au to receive a copy of the bi-monthly Wetlands Email Network Newsletter.

For more information or queries, please contact Leanne Cherry on (02) 49516466 or email project@wetlands.org.au.

Murray River National Parks - Wetland Magic

by Jacquie Kelly, Red Gum Icons Project Officer

'In flood, the wetland forests of the Murray River are the Kakadu of the south'

The Red Gum Icons Project is a joint initiative of the National Parks Association of NSW and the Victorian National Parks Association. The project aims to create a linked system of protected areas along the Murray River and its tributaries. This would include protecting in national park the iconic red gum and black box woodlands and forests of Barmah-Millewa, Gunbower-Koondrook-Pericoota and Chowilla-Lindsay-Walpolla.

Riverine red gum forests and woodlands are *ephemeral wetlands*. They need wetting and drying cycles. Red gums do not like wet feet; that is, they cannot cope with being flooded permanently. Without regular flooding these areas are in big trouble. The red gums become stressed, which is what we are seeing at the moment. The loss of habitat for the birds, fish and animals that live and breed there is yet to be fully measured.



*Red gums in flood, Nyah State Forest
(Photos above and right courtesy of NPA NSW)*

Within the riverine red gum and black box forests and woodlands there may be anabranches and cuts forming islands, billabongs, and permanent and semipermanent wetlands. These sites contain rare wetland types within the Riverina bioregion, particularly floodplain lake and floodplain meadows and reed swamps.

The Riverina forests that have been designated as Ramsar sites so far (no 1291) are Millewa-Barmah, Werwai, and Koondrook-Gunbower.

During a high river the whole floodplain will become part of the river. In the big floods the flood line will go up to the black box trees that are on the higher ground.

The management of the Murray Channel, which includes the river and its floodplain, is critical to the health of the ecosystems it supports. Many indicators are showing it is in desperate need of improvement.

Governments have had a policy of not calling the forests 'wetlands', to legitimate the logging and grazing that are taking place in these sensitive areas.

The wetlands have been subject to a catalogue of abuses over the years, and there is still rampant large-scale wood

harvesting in the remaining forests and woodlands along the Murray and its tributaries, on both public and private land.

Most of the forests in this area are state forest, and are managed for resource extraction and not for conservation. The logging industry is not sustainable, accountable or transparent. Most alarming are the practices in NSW where clear felling is occurring. Firewood is one of the main products taken from the forests, both legal and illegal. The commercial logging in NSW feeds the voracious appetite for red gum firewood in Melbourne.

The biodiversity that is dependant on the riverine ecosystems is immense. The wetlands are home to a huge variety of species including fish, frogs, reptiles, tens of thousands of waterbirds (JAMBA and CAMBA) and thousands of insects and plants; many of which we know little about, such as Australian bittern, superb parrot, silver perch, flat-headed galaxias, regent honeyeater, swift parrot, regent parrot, inland carpet python, Murray hardyhead and trout cod, painted snipe, glossy ibis, Caspian tern and white-bellied sea eagle, to name a few.



*Much of the timber taken from red gum forests
is destined for the fireplaces of Melbourne*

Bushwalking, fishing, camping, birdwatching, swimming, riding, boating (canoeing) and many other recreational pursuits are enjoyed in the forests, which are a big tourist attraction in the Murray Valley.

Many Aboriginal peoples have very strong connections to these wetland forests. This cultural landscape includes mounds, middens, scar trees and other evidence of thousands of years of occupation. Often there have been no comprehensive studies on such heritage places.

River regulation has reduced frequency, duration and magnitude of flooding. Red gums need to be flooded for a 2-3 month period, about 7 in 10 years. Watering at the wrong time has also changed the system. Floods often come in summer when they should come in winter/spring.

Levy banks and regulators stop water from entering the wetlands. Upgrading, replacing or removing regulators is now being done in some icon sites by the MDBIC as an emergency measure to allow for environmental flows.

Cattle-grazing occurs in most of the forests, even in Barmah-Millewa. Sheep graze on the NSW side near Chowilla. Such grazing does not allow a healthy understorey to grow. Loss of lignum and sedges and other

understorey species occurs. Cloven hoof animals pug up the wetland and destroy wetland plants. Stock can degrade frontages and cause erosion. They also compete with native animals such as kangaroo. Grazing threatens the quality of the wetland, and this historic practice must now stop.

Most forests need track rationalisation, pest plant and animal control and better management of recreational pressures. Rising ground water and salinity also pose threats.

The rate of decline of these forests is alarming. Our campaign aims to create awareness of these problems and make sure these icon areas are protected from the destructive practices of logging and grazing. They deserve much better management than they currently have, otherwise the many values for which they are so loved may be lost forever.

To lend your support or find out more about the campaign visit www.redgum.org.au or www.npansw.org.au.

The Living Murray Initiative: Swimming in the Details

by Juliet Le Feuvre, Land and Water Campaigns Assistant for the Australian Conservation Foundation

It was always going to be a challenge to sort out the detail of how to manage billions of litres of water to obtain maximum environmental benefit to the six significant ecological assets (icon sites) of the first step of the Living Murray Initiative. Throw in the added complexity of state borders, multiple land managers and the limited amount of water available, and it's no wonder developing management plans is a difficult business. Here we have a brief look at what is going on, who is in charge and what opportunities there will be for community engagement.

The framework for implementing the Living Murray Initiative is set out in the Living Murray Business Plan agreed on late last year by the Murray Darling Basin Ministerial Council (which consists of ministers from each of the basin states and the federal government). This document outlines processes for recovering the promised 500 GL of water and for delivering it to, and managing it at, the icon sites.

On the supply side, the NSW and Victorian governments have so far committed to returning a total of 240 GL to the environment. The largest NSW project involves piping the Darling Anabranch for stock and domestic purposes to reduce losses from seepage and evaporation and return the anabranch to a more natural flow regime. This project will return an estimated 47 GL to the system at a cost of \$54 million. Other projects at Bungunyah Karaleigh and Poon Poon lakes should return about 15 GL and NSW is also seeking savings through innovative water products. Victoria is proposing a new system of water entitlements which should provide an extra 120 GL for the environment and the decommissioning of Lake Mokoan.

These projects are a good start but provide only half of the required water and are not due to produce any flows until October 2006. The good news is that there is money available to provide the rest of the water. The state governments need to find suitable projects soon so that the first step can be fully implemented on time in 2008.

The Business Plan requires Asset Environmental Management Plans and a Community Reference Group for each of the icon sites. As so many jurisdictions are involved we will look at each site in turn.

Barmah-Millewa Forest straddles the NSW-Victoria state border. State Forests NSW and the Department of Sustainability and Environment Victoria have been

appointed Asset Managers with the Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs) on both sides of the border involved in community consultation. Victoria have produced a draft management plan for their side of the river while NSW are more interested in first sorting out the process for joint management before writing a plan. The joint plan is due for completion in September.

Gunbower and Kondrook-Perricoota Forest is in a similar position but with a different CMA involved in Victoria. For both sites it is likely that there will be a consultation process (possibly involving workshops) managed in NSW by the Murray CMA beginning in late June, followed by appointment of the Community Reference Group which should include representatives from both states.

Hattah Lakes has an easier process with only Victoria involved. The Mallee CMA has produced a draft management plan.

Chowilla Floodplain-Lindsay Walpolla crosses the SA-Victoria State border. The SA Department of Land, Water and Biodiversity Conservation (DLWBC) is finalizing the first draft of the Chowilla management plan which will incorporate the Lindsay and Walpolla plans formulated by the Mallee CMA. Again a consultation process will lead to the appointment of a community reference group which will provide advice and comment on development of the plan.

The **Murray Mouth, Coorong and Lower Lakes** management plan is being prepared by DWLBC.

The **River Channel**, which probably has more competing demands than any of the other assets, is in the fortunate position of having its management plan written by the Murray Darling Basin Commission and its Community Reference Group (CRG) already appointed. This group is quite large and broadly representative and will also seek community input and advise on more general aspects of LMI implementation.

The interim ecological objectives for each site are listed on the Living Murray website (<http://thelivingmurray.mdbc.gov.au>). The management plans are intended to ensure that these objectives are achieved. IRN will keep you informed of progress, but your best option for getting involved in the NSW sites is through the Murray CMA or by getting in touch with the River Channel CRG, of which Arlene Buchan, Healthy Rivers Campaigner, Australian Conservation Foundation, is a member.

The Darling River Action Group

by Brian (Barney) Stevens, Secretary of the Darling River Action Group

The Darling River Action Group Inc (DRAG) was started by a group of citizens from Broken Hill, Wilcannia and Menindee who were angry about the state of the Darling River, the Menindee Lakes and the town water supplies. Many of these people had never taken part in politics or in any environmental movement.

In February 2002, this group saw the Menindee Lakes deliberately and rapidly emptied by the Murray-Darling Basin Commission (MDBC). The MDBC control the lakes until they get down to 28% capacity, then control reverts to NSW. But this time an erroneous survey (40% error) of Lake Wetherell meant that there was only 18% capacity remaining when NSW DIPNR took over, and most of that 18% was spread out in shallow, inaccessible places where it was evaporating.

To many of us, this action of draining the lakes was irresponsible. With no rain and no summer flows we knew we were in a severe drought. In 2002 and the summer of 2003 there was little inflow into the lakes, so that during 2003 the remaining water became more and more saline as evaporation took its toll. Town water supplies became undrinkable, tasting of salt, rotted algae and chlorine. Almost everyone bought bottled water. Showering in town water caused skin rashes in some people, watering the garden had a negative effect on plants, stone fruit trees died, appliances like hot water systems, electric kettles and evaporative coolers corroded. Eventually we had water restrictions, but the water was of dubious value anyway. In late-2003/early-2004 a flow of water finally made it past the cotton farmers and reached Menindee Lakes. We were within three weeks of running out of water completely. The local water authority had plans to rail water from Port Pirie – it would have been our water that was let go down the Darling into Lake Victoria, into the Murray, piped to Port Pirie, and then railed back to us at great expense. It would also have been insufficient to supply the town and the mine.

The early-2004 flow only filled Lake Wetherell; the other lakes remained dry. Just before the flow arrived the authorities let go of the warm, stagnant, saline water remaining in Lake Wetherell and triggered a major kill of Murray cod. In early-2005 there was another flow, refilling Lake Wetherell and then filling Lake Pamamaroo. Presently the level of those lakes has dropped as water is run down the lower Darling. Lakes Menindee and Cawndilla remain empty.

Apart from the effects on town water, the lakes and river have been the recreation areas for Broken Hill and the river towns: fishing, boating, water skiing, swimming and just camping by the water. This is all on top of the blue-green algae outbreaks that started in about 1991. So maybe you can see why the locals are angry.

DRAG began with rallies in a park in Broken Hill and a street march. Regular meetings were held, and in June 2004 the group was incorporated. Since then the main

activities have been publicising the problems with the river, lakes and water supplies, and lobbying politicians. Most of the population of Broken Hill blame cotton farmers and the politicians who set them up for the deplorable condition of the Darling River. The cotton farmers blame the drought, but neither the cotton farmers nor the politicians are willing to concede that the never-ending drought is driven by climate change, and that we need to adjust to the changing climate. And no one answers the question "why grow cotton in the worst drought in history?"

The aim of DRAG is to improve the health of the Darling River in terms of water flow, water quality and riverside environment. Our allies in this endeavour are several: the obvious ones are the various environmental groups and the Aboriginal groups in river towns; less obvious are the graziers who used to rely on the river for stock water and boundary fencing, the people of South Australia who rely on quality and quantity of water coming down the Murray River, tourism businesses who are suffering, and even some irrigators who are being disadvantaged by upstream irrigators. We have had three Chairpersons in our first year: Aboriginal elder Bill Riley; Geoff Walch, a small irrigator from Menindee and Greens candidate; and National Party member Marie Wecker. All are still active members. Our cause transcends political and ethnic divides.

Two people we have not been able to reach are our local parliamentary representatives. Both state and federal members have enormous electorates with very varied interests. Our federal member, the National Party's John Cobb is not likely to want to upset the wealthy irrigation interests. Peter Black, the state Labor member, recently called for no cap on the Barwon-Darling.

DRAG held a public meeting in Wilcannia on 3 April this year. It was well-attended and very timely, as the Darling River stopped flowing that day. The 'flood' flow that came through Wilcannia in February lasted only 10 days. A fishing competition was held while the river was running, and only one fish was caught.

DRAG has had very good publicity in Broken Hill, but the message about the poor condition of the Darling River needs to be spread further afield. This is where the environmental groups with their large city memberships can help. Let the people and media of the big cities know what is happening to that Australian icon, the Darling River. It is being drained for irrigation, mostly cotton. Average flow in the lower Darling has been reduced by 40% and the irrigators want more. The president of the Bourke Chamber of Commerce said in 2002 that Bourke could become the food bowl of Southeast Asia. All it needed was **MORE WATER**. Dams on cotton farms have replaced the Menindee Lakes as the water features of the inland. Cubbie Station has diverted the entire Culgoa River. Clyde Agriculture (owned by the fabulously rich Swire Group of Britain) diverts almost the whole flow of the Warrego River and pumps from the Darling. All of the tributaries of the Darling River in NSW have large dams on them, and the authorities let almost no water into the Darling from these tributaries. The only time any decent amounts of water get into the Darling is when there is a flood too large for the cotton farmers' pumps to suck out of the river. So when there is flooding in Tamworth, we cheer. What a sick situation!

Darling Initiative moves forward

by Sarah Moles, environmental representative on the Darling Initiative Working Group

In the six months since a group interested in the future of the Darling Basin first met in Moree, progress towards a Darling Initiative has gained momentum. A community forum in late February, again in Moree, attracted more than 130 members of the Darling Basin community, with interests ranging from the environment to grazing to Indigenous heritage to irrigation.

Despite the diversity of the group, there was overwhelming support for the establishment of a community-led initiative to guide the integrated management of the rivers of the Darling Basin. The forum elected a working group of 13 people broadly representative of sectors and regions of the Basin to develop a process for taking an initiative forward. The governments of Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia each contributed \$10,000 to fund the working group's activities, and the states also pledged staff support.

After two meetings the working group has done a considerable amount of work and

completed the threshold task of defining its terms of reference. A lot of effort has gone into ensuring that members from the northern catchments understand the issues of those from the southern catchments and the mainstem Darling, and vice versa. The group has assembled information on existing projects and processes.

The group is now busy preparing an action plan for the initiative based on three fundamental themes: healthy rivers, community expectations for equity for this and future generations, and the best available information. The group will report on this plan, and options and recommendations for ways forward, at a second community forum in late-August or September.

If you are interested in the ecological health of Darling Basin rivers and wetlands and would like to be involved in the development of the initiative, please contact me. One of the important tasks given to members of the working group is to maintain two-way communication with community members in their sectors, so by contacting me you're helping me do my job. My email address is umgawal@gil.com.au.

LET THE DARLING RIVER FLOW

by Peter Thompson

Because we remember
the fish
the ducks
the gum trees
the floods
the swimming
the old people:

We will fight them on the bare river
banks
and in the algal blooms
on the weirs
and in the irrigation ditches

The river demands to be
a leisure river
mocking time
not a workaholic

not a slave
not even a working class hero
or any other type of cannon fodder
especially not a globalised
neoliberal river.

Never will we allow
the Darling to become
a free trade river.

Rather
a 'fair go' river
sounds better,
perhaps even
a 'fair flow' river,
as wild and free
as we can let it be.

Peter Thompson was inspired to write this poem by his experience as an environmental representative on the Darling Initiative Working Group. Who says committee work is the enemy of art?

Across the Basin

BARWON-DARLING

After ten years of dithering and delay, the NSW government proposed a strategy for implementing the Murray-Darling Basin Cap in the chronically noncompliant Barwon-Darling. Unfortunately, the proposed cap strategy has several flaws that may prevent it from being an effective device for controlling extractions.

MACQUARIE MARSHES

The weather continued dry into a fifth consecutive year with no waterbird breeding. Combined with the January fires, the lack of water puts the marshes at unprecedented risk of ecological collapse.

CHOWILLA FLOODPLAIN

The NSW Murray Wetlands Working Group and the South Australian government joined to deliver water to thousands of severely stressed river red gums on the Chowilla floodplain, one of the significant ecological assets of the Living Murray Initiative. The project will use 2300 megalitres of water to sustain 217 hectares of wetland forest.

MURRAY RIVER

Under pressure from environment groups, the Victorian government expanded an inquiry into management of Murray River red gum forests to encompass all major forests on public land from Hume Weir to the South Australian border. The inquiry will also include forests on the lower reaches of the Avoca, Campaspe, Goulburn, Loddon and Ovens. Currently none of these wetland forests are protected in Victorian national parks.

MURRAY MOUTH

The Murray-Darling Basin Commission announced that dredging would be required indefinitely at the mouth of the Murray because of water extractions for irrigation and 'drought'. For the past several years, the dredging has been the only thing keeping the mouth open and the Coorong from ecological collapse. Even if the drought breaks, overextraction for irrigation may mean that the dredges will operate in 50 per cent of years in the future.





Counting Australia's Protected Rivers

by Jon Nevill

How many Australian rivers are protected from threats to their biodiversity? Answering this question depends on how 'protection' and 'rivers' are defined. Protection from alien species is sometimes impossible. However in some cases rivers can be protected from flow modification and catchment disturbance. Techniques are available for managing highly connected linear protected areas (Saunders et al. 2002).

At least five major Australian rivers are highly protected, with almost all of their catchments lying in protected areas, no dams or weirs, and no significant water extraction. These are the Shannon River (Shannon River National Park, Western Australia), the Prince Regent (Prince Regent River Biosphere Reserve, WA), the South Alligator River (Kakadu Ramsar site and Kakadu National Park, Northern Territory), the Jardine River (Jardine River National Park, Queensland), and the Franklin River (Southwest World Heritage Area, Tasmania).

Amongst smaller streams with protected catchments, a few are worthy of specific note. As discussed below, Tasmania's Southwest World Heritage Area, although damaged by hydroelectric development, does protect many streams as well as the major Franklin River. Victoria's "Essentially Natural Catchment B1" (LCC 1991) protects the small but undisturbed coastal catchments (14,470 ha) of the Red and Benodone Rivers together with Shipwreck, Seal and Easby Creeks. The entire catchment of Hosnie's Springs on Christmas Island is protected within either national park or Ramsar site boundaries. The catchment of Rocky River is completely protected within South Australia's Kangaroo Island National Park.

The identification of protected rivers is an important precursor to more advanced river protection policy development. The paper this short article summarises presents a preliminary overview. A first step on a basic analysis could be undertaken using existing information. A careful comparison of the national wild rivers and protected area databases should provide considerable additional information on which undisturbed Australian rivers (and river segments) are already protected: this study is recommended as an immediate priority. Such a study does not appear to feature on current lists of government research priorities.

The full version of 'Counting Australia's Protecting Rivers' is available from the freshwater page of OnlyOnePlanet:

<http://www.ids.org.au/~cnevill/freshwater.htm>.

Jon Nevill is the principal of OnlyOnePlanet Consulting, www.onlyoneplanet.com.au.

The Inland Rivers Network of NSW brings together community groups and individuals with the goal of restoring and conserving the biodiversity, natural function and health of the inland river systems and wetlands of NSW. Together with local, regional, state and national conservation groups, IRN seeks to promote greater understanding of the threats to inland rivers and the communities that rely upon their survival.

IRN steering committee member organisations:

- Australian Conservation Foundation
- Nature Conservation Council of NSW
- National Parks Association of NSW
- Coast and Wetlands Society
- Friends of the Earth



Help IRN protect our inland rivers and bring security and sustainability to regional communities.

Send your donation to:
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Inland Rivers Network
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29-35 Shepherd St
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Tel: 02 9212 5112 Fax: 02 9212 6977 Mob: 0407 279 088
E-mail: coordinator@irnsw.org.au
Web: www.irnsw.org.au
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IRN Conference Proceedings – Available Now

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- **Thermal Pollution of the Murray-Darling Waterways (Available as book. It is not available on CD-ROM.)**

The phenomenon of thermal pollution is not new. The lowering of water temperatures downstream from large dams has resulted in a significant decline in native fish populations. The flow-on of this cold water pollution into a wide range of social, environmental and economic impacts is now only beginning to be documented.

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