

Failing Marks for NSW Water Plans

\$258 million in competition payments for NSW at risk

The National Competition Council has given New South Wales failing marks for its recently commenced water sharing plans and is considering a substantial reduction in competition payments to the state, scheduled to be \$258 million in 2004-05.

The harsh assessment came as part of the Competition Council's annual review of states' performance of their obligations under the 1994 CoAG water reform agreement. The review focused on whether NSW had allocated enough water in the plans to achieve sustainable ecological ecosystems.

The Competition Council's answer was a straightforward no, which is all the more notable because the National Competition Council is about as far from a radical green organisation as possible. It was established by all Australian governments to oversee the implementation of the National Competition Policy, a broad policy to improve Australia's economic competitiveness, including through water reform. The Competition Council is funded by the Commonwealth and is accountable to the Coalition of Australian Governments, or CoAG. The Competition Council has the authority to recommend reduction or suspension of competition payments to the states from the Commonwealth Government if states are not complying with their reform responsibilities.



Although the Competition Council's assessment and recommendations are couched in the careful language of agency-speak, when viewed as a whole they amount to a blistering indictment of NSW's environmental performance. In its overall conclusion, the Competition Council states:

The Council considers that New South Wales has not met its CoAG obligation to provide appropriate allocations of water to the environment in stressed and/or over-allocated rivers. Acknowledging CoAG's 1994 statement that action needed to be taken to address widespread natural resource degradation occasioned in part by water use and its considerable concern (expressed in August 2003) over the pace of securing adequate

environmental flows and adaptive management arrangements to ensure ecosystem health in Australia's river systems, the Council attaches a great deal of importance to this matter.

The Competition Council didn't hold back in its assessments of individual water plans either. It undertook detailed assessments of five regulated river plans, two unregulated river plans and two groundwater plans. Here is the Council on the Gwydir Regulated River Plan:

New South Wales did not provide evidence to show that the ecological requirements of the downstream wetlands and the native flora and fauna of the system would be met.

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On the Namoi Regulated River Plan:

New South Wales did not provide evidence to show that the plan addresses the water needs of the floodplain wetlands.

On the Murrumbidgee Regulated River Plan:

New South Wales did not provide evidence to support the sustainability of the extraction limits and other rules established under the plan.

On the Upper and Lower Namoi Groundwater Sources Plan (not yet commenced):

The draft plan does not reserve a portion of annual recharge for the environment. As such it does not accord with the State's Draft Groundwater Dependent Ecosystems Policy (New South Wales Government 2000), which recommends 30 per cent of average annual recharge for the environment where the environmental requirements are not known.

Because of NSW's inadequate performance, the Competition Council considered reducing the state's 2003-04 competition payment. But it decided to give NSW one last chance, in spite of the fact that, in its words, "the Council provided considerable opportunity to the New South Wales Government either to provide information to show that its water planning will deliver appropriate environmental allocations (in line with the 1994 CoAG water reform strategic framework) for its surface and groundwater systems or to further develop its arrangements so that CoAG obligations are likely to be met."

In the end, the Competition Council issued a stiff warning that it will consider a substantial suspension or reduction in payments for 2004-05, unless New South Wales (1) shows that its water sharing plans go as far as possible to sustain ecological values while recognising existing rights, or (2) commits to further developing arrangements by 1 July 2005 to achieve sustainable water sharing.

The ball is now in New South Wales' court. Up to \$258 million is at stake.

Brendan Fletcher, IRN Coordinator

The Competition Council's assessment of the New South Wales water plans is available at:
<http://www.ncc.gov.au/pdf/AST5WtSuA-002.pdf>

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Editor's Note

Grass roots. Without any elaboration at all the words evoke earth, the fundamentals, connectedness and specificity.

The law. The word evokes authority, abstraction, generality.

The grass roots, full of life and potential, and the law, bloodless and restrictive.

Seemingly opposites, the grass roots and the law come together over and over in environmental campaigning. The historic Franklin Dam campaign could not have been won without the power of both grass roots campaigning and the law. The extraordinary grass roots energy of the blockades and huge rallies in the cities swung a federal election and led to a Commonwealth Government decision to stop the dam. Yet final victory was not secured until a favourable court decision upholding the Commonwealth's decision.



MYRiveR student in the field, making a difference for the Murray

Grass roots campaigning and the law are both vital tools in the environmentalist toolkit, and this issue of the IRN News focuses on both elements with special sections.

On pages 6-9, we shine a spotlight on four groups that are out on our rivers, day in and day out, raising awareness and promoting community involvement. Two of those groups – the Central West Environment Council and the Albury-Wodonga Environment Centre – are both education and advocacy oriented. They publicise the environmental issues that are most pressing in their local communities and follow up with submissions and rallies that press the government toward more environmentally responsible policies.

Waterkeepers Australia plays a different role: it provides some of the support necessary for the difficult task of starting and maintaining a community group to monitor and take responsibility for the health of its local waterway. Waterkeepers can be a facilitator for a group just starting up, a resource for new or established groups or a coordinator among existing groups.

The final group may play the most important role of all. With MYRiveR and related programs, OzGREEN is helping young people around the Murray Darling Basin acquire the skills to understand the health of their local waterway and translate that understanding into informed action. Whether these youth become scientists, agency staff, irrigators or even environmentalists, they will bring a skill set and enthusiasm to freshwater conservation that our rivers sorely need.

Following on our recent special issue on the *New South Wales Water Management Act* amendments, our other special section is on the arid but crucial policy of water

reform – specifically, the outcomes of the CoAG National Water initiative and the *NSW Water Management Amendments Bill 2004*.

Unfortunately, the topic is even drier than usual - neither CoAG nor the New South Wales Government delivered for the environment. The National Water Initiative was issued with no accompanying commitment from the Commonwealth to fund recovery of water for the environment. The *Water Management Amendments Bill* included a suite of legal changes to make irrigators' water use entitlements more secure, but nothing to enhance the security of the environment.

While the result was disappointing, opportunities remain within the National Water Initiative and its implementation in New South Wales, and in IRN's view we have no choice but to play those opportunities for their full worth. For IRN's take on the latest developments, see pages 4-5.

The rest of this issue has the latest from around the Basin, plus the registration form for the conference on Freshwater Protected Areas that IRN and WWF Australia are holding 27-28 September. The conference will be a major gathering of conservationists and others interested in freshwater protected areas from around Australia. Naturally, readers of the IRN News are cordially invited. For more information, turn to page 15 or visit the IRN website, www.irnsw.org.au.

If you have questions or comments, or something you'd like to see in the next issue, write me at coordinator@irnsw.org.au.

Brendan Fletcher
IRN Coordinator

National Water Initiative – More Words than Water

by Brendan Fletcher

The Council of Australian Governments (CoAG) finally announced its much ballyhooed National Water Initiative (NWI) after its meeting on 25 June 2004. But two states – Western Australia and Tasmania – didn't sign up for the party, and nobody seemed willing to pay for the cake (or any water for the environment).

After a year of negotiation and discussion, the outlines of the agreement contained no major surprises on policy – it committed states to open-ended entitlements for water users, addressing overallocation, and removing impediments to water trading. The biggest disappointment was what the agreement left out – any new commitment to recovering water for Australia's stressed rivers.

This failure to put money where CoAG's mouth is prompted criticism from the major environmental groups. Australian Conservation Foundation Director Don Henry said, "What we have here is half of what we asked for. The federal and state governments have acknowledged the importance of these issues but they have not offered up any additional money to get the job done."

Brooke Flanagan, Executive Officer for the Nature Conservation Council of New South Wales, said, "The best that the combined Governments could manage was a reannouncement of the \$500 million [for the Murray] that was agreed to in August 2003. It's just not good enough."

Other major features of the NWI are as follows:

- Water access entitlements are generally to be open-ended or perpetual entitlements to a share of the resource. In New South Wales, water users will have perpetual entitlements as a result of the *Water Management Amendments Act 2004*.
- Overallocated water systems are to be returned to sustainable levels of use to meet environmental outcomes, with substantial progress by 2010. Although the environmental community has heard this promise many times before and been disappointed as often, sustainability remains the goal of water reform and the community retains the leverage to force governments to honour this commitment.
- A framework for assigning the financial risk of future reductions in water availability as follows:
 - reductions from natural events such as climate change borne by water users.
 - reductions from improvements in knowledge to be borne by water users up to 2014. After 2014, water users to bear this risk for the first 3 per cent reduction, states/territories and the Commonwealth to share the risk in varying proportions above 3 per cent.
 - reductions from changes in government policy to be paid for by government.

In theory this framework allows some flexibility for governments to scale back diversions over the next ten years without massive payouts, but as the law currently

NSW Water Act Leaves Rivers High and Dry

by Brendan Fletcher

While the National Water Initiative was long on rhetoric and short on cash, the latest episode of water reform in New South Wales does not offer environmentalists even the small comfort of words. The Carr Government shepherded the *Water Management Amendment Act 2004* through Parliament 23 June 2004 without amendment, without financial support for restoring rivers, and without so much as a gesture toward the goal of returning rivers to sustainability.

The Act amounts to a security package for water users – they obtained perpetual entitlements, the possibility of extensions to the water plans the National Competition Council has found inadequate, and streamlined procedures for assessing extensions of approvals for works, water use, and aquifer interference.

Greens MLC Ian Cohen introduced a set of amendments designed to balance the *Water Management Amendment Act 2004* with some security for the environment. Mr Cohen's amendments included a procedure for returning water to the environment gradually over ten years to minimise impacts on irrigators. The amendments were rejected in toto.

New South Wales' failure to recover water at home also lessened the incentive for the National Water Initiative to deliver. According to Mr Cohen, "We should have used the last 12 months to address the extent of overallocation of water and river health in NSW, but instead we go to the table at CoAG having categorically failed to do either."

Peak environment groups echoed Ian Cohen. "The NSW Government has given a huge windfall to irrigators but has so far refused to give the environment its fair share," said NCC Executive Officer, Brooke Flanagan. "NSW has some of the most stressed rivers in the country - a fact this government has consistently ignored."

The central changes to the Act are as follows:

- The term of access entitlements has been extended from 15 years to in perpetuity. This means that a licence holder has an entitlement to a share of the water resource forever. It does not mean that share cannot be adjusted for environmental purposes.



stands in New South Wales, this possibility is largely foreclosed because the water sharing plans took effect 1 July. The NSW water plans require compensation for most changes within the ten-year plan life.

- Assessments of the amount of water intercepted by land use activities. Although the detail here is unclear, this provision may offer the opportunity to get some control over poorly documented overland harvesting activities.
- Continued implementation of full-cost recovery pricing. As always, it will be a challenge to push the price of water even part way toward genuinely reflecting all of the environmental costs of irrigation (and other uses), but full-cost recovery pricing remains as an important goal.

CoAG also agreed to establish a National Water Commission, which will assess states' progress in implementing the NWI. The Commission will take over from the National Competition Council the role of assessing states' progress in water reform, including the 2005 assessment of progress under the 1994 CoAG agreement. This body has the potential to play a useful role, but what is not known about the Commission is whether it will have the authority to recommend reductions in competition policy payments, as the Competition Council has now. It will be vital to ensure that the National Water Commission has the authority to penalize states that do not comply with their reform obligations, especially in light of the Competition Council's finding that New South Wales is not doing enough to return water to the environment.



- Water sharing plans can be extended upon the recommendation of the newly established Natural Resources Commission. The requirement that the Commission recommend for extension builds some accountability into the system, but extension still does not require concurrence from the Minister for the Environment. Perhaps most importantly, even contemplating extension of the current plans is irresponsible when New South Wales stands to lose millions in competition payments because the plans fail to return enough water to the environment (see cover story).

With the state legislation in place, the major action on water reform will be taking place in conjunction with the National Water Initiative.

For the full text of the *Water Management Amendment Act 2004*, go to:

<http://www.legislation.nsw.gov.au/viewtop/inforce/act+39+2004+FIRST+0+N/>

Editorial - Time for Action on Water Reform

The National Competition Council's stinging assessment of the New South Wales water sharing plans (see our cover story) is just the latest piece of evidence that water reform has gone off the rails in New South Wales.

The Competition Council's rebuke carries all the more weight because it comes from the top-level government body charged with measuring the progress of water reform, but to NSW environment groups and others interested in freshwater conservation it comes as no surprise. The evidence of freshwater ecosystem decline is all around us.

The Macquarie Marshes, one of New South Wales' most important inland wetlands for waterbirds, are in danger of ecological collapse. Hundreds of huge Murray Cod were lost in a fish kill on the lower Darling earlier this year. The entire ecological communities of the lower Murray and lower Darling have been listed as endangered under the *Fisheries Management Act 1994*.

Yet in the face of this irrefutable evidence of environmental decline the response of the Carr Government, particularly the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources, is to defend and entrench the status quo.

The *Water Management Amendment Bill 2004* introduces perpetual access licences and allows extension of the water sharing plans that even the National Competition Council finds inadequate. The Government has announced no plans for how it intends to provide its share of the 500 GL target for the Living Murray initiative. The Government has made no commitment, financial or even rhetorical, to recovering water for stressed rivers outside the southern Murray Darling Basin such as the Macquarie, Gwydir and upper Darling.

Contrast this with the performance of our neighbours to the south. In conjunction with the release of its White Paper on water reform, the Victorian Government announced that it would return up to 169 GL of water to the Snowy and Murray and 25 GL to the Thomson and McAlister rivers. The National Competition Council considers that Victoria has met its water reform obligations to date under the 1994 CoAG Agreement. While Victoria has a long way to go before genuinely achieving sustainable rivers, its policy manifests a recognition – absent in New South Wales – that water reform consists of providing adequate environmental flows as well as improving water allocation for consumptive uses such as irrigation.

IRN urges the Carr Government to see this embarrassing situation not as a threat, but as an opportunity. It is time for New South Wales to stop making excuses on water reform and to start actively seeking out opportunities to return water to the environment. If the Government will make the commitment, IRN and its supporters stand ready to assist however we can.

Brendan Fletcher, IRN Coordinator



Students from Meningie Area School (South Australia) doing faecal coliform testing

Roll, MYRiveR, Roll!

by Sue Lennox

The entire River Murray catchment was the focus this year of MYRiveR, one of Australia's most successful and respected participatory environmental education programs. Building on the outstanding success of MYRiveR Murrumbidgee in 2002, MYRiveR Darling in 2003 and independent non-profit Oz GREEN's fifteen-plus years of innovative and award-winning environmental education experience, MYRiveR Murray was an event to be seen.

The MYRiveR program is a call to young people, their families and communities along the River Murray. The project engages young people in a comprehensive investigation of the health of the entire catchment and in the development of a youth voice, vision and plans of action. In 2002 and 2003 Oz GREEN worked with over 600 students from 36 schools along with other key organisations throughout the Murrumbidgee and Darling River catchments in 'taking the pulse' of the river and developing youth voice, vision and action plans to care for the river.

As an integral component of the overall MYRiveR plan for the Murray-Darling Basin, this year it was time for MYRiveR on the River Murray. From April to June MYRiveR Murray rolled down the River Murray, from Corryong in the Snowy Mountains to the Coorong where the Murray reaches the sea (nine regional centres - Corryong, Albury-Wodonga, Echuca, Bendigo, Seymour, Swan Hill, Mildura, Renmark, Murray Bridge-Goolwa).

Schools worked with Oz GREEN and local organisations such as Waterwatch to undertake the most ambitious and comprehensive community-led environmental

snapshot of health of the entire River Murray catchment. The program directly involved over 500 young people from 37 schools and included:

- **Community Environmental Snapshot**

Taking the pulse of the river to check on its health at 171 sites (environmental assessments, biodiversity, erosion, vegetation cover, water quality testing) and 900 community surveys conducted.

- **2-Day Youth Congress**

To interpret the results, identify how the river is important, the threats to catchment health, develop youth vision for the future of the river and action plans for how young people will contribute to the care of the catchment.

- **Youth-led Community Forum**

Youth presented the results of their findings to their local community and invited the community to get behind their plans.

- **World Oceans Day ceremony at Goolwa (8 June)**

Young people wrote messages to the river in the sand and poured waters collected from the headwaters of the Darling, Murrumbidgee and Murray Rivers into the sea at the Murray Mouth to symbolically reconnect river flow memory lines.

Reporting of results of this year's program on the Murray, as well the 2002 program on the Murrumbidgee and the 2003 program on the Darling, is available at the MYRiverR website www.myriver.org.au.

Sue Lennox is the co-founder and CEO for OzGREEN. More information is available at www.ozgreen.org.au or by calling (02)9984 8917.

Albury-Wodonga Environment Centre

A Voice for the Environment on the Upper Murray

by Jonathon Howard

Located on the NSW-Victoria border, Albury-Wodonga Environment Centre encourages the conservation, preservation, protection and sustainable management of the environment within Australia and overseas but with particular reference to the environs of southeastern and southwestern New South Wales and northeastern and northwestern Victoria.

We have a resource centre and a meeting venue for members of the public and other organisations concerned about the environment. Staffed by a small group of dedicated volunteers, it provides an important public face to the regional community.

Our members undertake various activities that range from raising public awareness to being actively involved in conservation. Not only do we have the shop front mentioned earlier, but we attend local festivals and events, participate in national and state protests such as those over Lake Cowal, the Otways and Refugees, and we get involved in many local issues such as the Albury-Wodonga bypass, alpine cattle grazing and GMOs. We are also involved in local revegetation programs, from seed collection and germination to planting.

Being located on the border, the use and management of inland rivers in both Victoria and New South Wales are an issue. The Centre has been involved in the water reform process in New South Wales and Victoria -

providing input to the development of several river management plans including those for the Kiewa, Ovens, Indi, Billabong, Murray, and groundwater sources. It is hard to achieve real environmental gains when we are arguing against the more highly organised water extractors, but at least in many cases lines in the sand have been drawn.

Surveys show the most important environmental issue for the local communities are our waterways. We use our waterways for drinking, farming, business, tourism and recreation. Issues such as blue-green algae, the proposal to build a tourist 'port' in Albury, and riverbank erosion caused by speedboats can quickly crystallise community opinion. Other, more conceptual issues, such as the Living Murray and need for environmental flows are harder for the community to understand - particularly during these times of drought and rural enterprise reform. Fortunately, except for a few vested interests who continually question the science, there is widespread understanding that something needs to be done - the debate is really over what and when.

Jonathon Howard is Lecturer in Protected Areas Management at Charles Sturt University and a member of Albury-Wodonga Environment Centre. The Albury-Wodonga Environment Centre can be contacted on (02) 6021 2627.

Waterkeepers Australia Makes a Splash

by Greg Hunt

What is your nearest river like? Would you drink from it or plunge in for a refreshing swim? Would you tuck in heartily to a grilled fish that you caught in the local bay or estuary? Does your nearest wetland teem with birdlife? Do the frogs call loudly at night? Or is your waterway troubled and stressed through too much water being taken out? Perhaps too much of the wrong thing is being put in, with your waterway used as a drain to carry away runoff and pollutants.

Australia is a dry continent, our rainfall is highly variable and there is intense competition for water for meeting human needs and the needs of other species. Involvement in the public debate about the management and use of our water and waterways is not for the faint-hearted. Active communities need to know what they should contribute and how they should contribute to be effective. Waterkeepers Australia, a national network of people offering care and protection for their local waterways, came into being to strengthen the voice of the community in the debate. We are a not-for-profit organisation committed to supporting community advocates such as riverkeepers and baykeepers for the protection of our waterways.

Waterkeepers Australia is a collaboration of The Myer Foundation, Australian Conservation Foundation and Environment Victoria and was inspired by the successful US Waterkeepers Alliance. The national office is located in Victoria, and we work with and offer support to concerned and active community groups involved in waterway protection across Australia to complement their work of biodiversity and water quality monitoring, community education and communication. Waterkeepers Australia also works with the Environment Defenders Office in enabling Waterkeepers to engage in legal advocacy to protect local waterways.



Tasks that community-based riverkeepers, creekkeepers, lakekeepers and baykeepers might carry out in caring for their waterways and their natural values include reporting pollution, monitoring biodiversity and measuring stream river flows. They might plan and conduct communication programs in their communities or work with a local management authority to improve a reach of the local river. They might obtain funding support to rehabilitate a damaged estuarine mangrove community or to pay for a boat to make sure they can keep an eye on their patch. Waterkeepers Australia will support the local community in the actions they are taking to look after their waterways.

Waterkeepers Australia can help your community group with organisational development, how to become incorporated and how to raise funds. We also provide members with access to experts, legal advice, recent research and education programs. We are keen to cooperate with other community groups in this important work, contributing from our niche of community education, social and legal advocacy and support.

For further information on how to become involved, please phone National Coordinator Greg Hunt on (03) 9347 3810 or email greghunt@waterkeepers.org.au. The Waterkeepers Australia website is at: <http://www.waterkeepers.org.au>.

Waterkeepers Australia Board and staff meet with patron Sir William Deane AC KBE

From left: Catherine Brown, Company Secretary; Greg Hunt, National Coordinator; Paul Sinclair, Environment Victoria; Sir William Deane; Tim Fisher, Australian Conservation Foundation; Joann Baeviski, Myer Foundation.

Central West Environment Council

Working for Environmental Gains in Inland NSW

by Bev Smiles

The Central West Environment Council (CWEC) is made up of representatives of conservation groups and individuals from across the Central West region. Active groups are present in Orange, Dubbo, Coonabarabran, Mudgee, Rylstone, Parkes and Cowra, while individual members attend from Bathurst, Wellington and Molong. The Council meets around the region on a quarterly basis and sends representatives to various forums, workshops and events which occur throughout the year.

CWEC is a member group of Nature Conservation Council (NCC) and has provided NCC regional representatives on the many natural resource management committees established during the previous terms of the NSW Government. These positions included:

- Central West Catchment Management Board
- Macquarie-Cudgegong River Management Committee
- Central West Unregulated Streams Committee
- Macquarie Groundwater Committee
- Lachlan Groundwater Committee
- Lachlan River Management Committee
- Mid Lachlan Regional Vegetation Committee
- North Lachlan–Bogan Regional Vegetation Committee
- Lower Macquarie Regional Vegetation Committee.

Needless to say this has kept Council members very busy over the past five years.

CWEC has also played an integral role in the first Western Region Assessment held in NSW in the Brigalow Belt South bioregion. Members took on positions in the stakeholder workshops, the technical panel and the negotiation team aiming for improved biodiversity protection in the region.

These positions have enabled members to raise concerns and issues relating to biodiversity in the region, and to negotiate some improvements in natural resource management. In addition, Bev Smiles, Secretary of CWEC, has been elected as the western region representative on the NCC Executive Committee. This increases the opportunity to raise awareness of issues in western NSW at the state level.

As IRN News readers know, the water sharing plan process was long, frustrating and generally disappointing, for CWEC members as for others around the state. But we did achieve an important win for the environment. The unregulated water sharing plan developed on the Castlereagh River above Binnaway is the only plan in western NSW to have recognised a High Conservation River. Shawns Creek, which rises in the Warrumbungles, has been protected from any further extraction. This outcome was achieved through close communication with local conservationists and effective negotiation at the committee level.

The concept of freshwater aquatic reserves was presented to a public meeting held in Mudgee for Water Week 2001 by the past Inland Rivers Networker, Greg Williams. The promotion of aquatic reserves has become a goal of CWEC and the Shawns Creek protection is a significant first step in raising the profile of the concept.

Water management will continue to have a high profile while the inland rivers are expected to support unsustainable irrigation industries during periods of extreme drought. A prime example of this is on the Macquarie River, where last year DIPNR staff decided to change the resource assessment to allow an increase in allocation to 19 per cent in response to strong pressure from the cotton industry. Most of the stakeholder representatives on the river management committee have not supported this decision which is basically a gamble and increases the risk of the system crashing if the drought doesn't break this year.

This decision will result in a greater restriction of flows to the iconic Macquarie Marshes over a much longer period of time. The Marshes have been identified as the most important inland wetland for migratory bird breeding in Australia.

Being the spokespeople for our native wildlife and plants is not an easy task in an often harsh and hostile western environment. The opportunity to meet and communicate regularly through the CWEC networks engenders encouragement, support and solace from the meeting of like minds.

For more information about the Central West Environment Council contact Chairperson Paul Meeth, (02) 6362 7268, or Secretary Bev Smiles, (02) 6372 3330, npovah@yahoo.com, Wollar PO NSW 2850.

Murray Cod Group Communiqué

Editor's note – The following communiqué was released to national and regional media following a workshop on the future of Murray Cod hosted by the Murray-Darling Basin Commission.

A group of scientists and river workers today strongly refuted recent media comments attacking the scientific credibility of management initiatives in the Murray-Darling Basin, particularly the results of fish surveys (*The Australian*, 15/5/2004).

The Murray Cod Group was formed after a recent specialist workshop on Murray Cod hosted by the Murray-Darling Basin Commission, which was attended by over 50 fish scientists, angling representatives and river managers. The group agreed that the media attacks had been biased and misleading and they depended on highly selective interpretations. The group's spokesman, Dr John Harris, said that if the public were to be misled, native fish rehabilitation and improvements in river health could be seriously compromised.

The Murray Cod Workshop, while noting recent population improvements in some areas, possibly driven by hatchery stocking, agreed there has been a significant decline in the species' abundance since European settlement, justifying its listing by the Commonwealth as 'Vulnerable'. Research results from studies including a survey of NSW rivers, analyses of commercial fisheries data, a study of the Campaspe River, and pilot studies in the Sustainable Rivers Audit all supported the conclusions and justify concerns for this iconic species of Australian rivers.

Research results for Murray Cod have been overwhelmingly supported by data on the declines of other native fish. The Native Fish Strategy, recently released by the MDBC to guide rehabilitation of native fish in the Basin, reported that native fish populations are estimated to be at about 10 per cent of their levels before European settlement and eight of the 35 species are nationally listed as 'threatened', with at least two being 'critically endangered'. Under state legislation, 16 MDB species are listed as threatened. Many species have become locally extinct in large areas of the Basin, including once-abundant fish such as freshwater catfish and silver perch. Golden perch no longer breed upstream of most dams. In the South Australian Murray, small species including olive perchlet and purple-spotted gudgeon have disappeared. In the Campaspe River, only three of the 15 to 18 species predicted to have once lived and bred in the river now have self-sustaining populations. Research surveys have repeatedly shown that alien species like carp, redfin perch, eastern gambusia and goldfish dominate the Basin's fish community.

Dr Harris said that the Murray Cod Group was concerned to ensure that media reports reflect the overwhelming scientific opinion that native fish are in serious decline and management initiatives are justified and urgently needed.

Dr John Harris is the spokesman for the Murray Cod Group. To contact Dr. Harris about the Murray Cod Group Communiqué, call 0409 952 528.

Adelaide to Canberra

We must ACT NOW to save the Murray!

by Peter Owen

A crowd of over 500 people at the recent River Murray Public Meeting sent a very clear message to Canberra – at the next election, South Australians have little choice but to vote for which ever political party is committed to restoring the Murray to health.

The meeting was organised by the Australian Conservation Foundation and the Conservation Council of South Australia.

A panel of experts addressing the meeting (including Associate Professor Keith Walker, Dr David Paton, Mike Young, Henry Jones and Matt Rigney) was adamant that returning at least 1500 GL of annual flows is the bare minimum to have any chance of saving the river. For a city like Adelaide, reliant on the Murray for up to 80 per cent of its water supply, this issue could not be more serious.

A panel of senators and senate candidates/advisors (including Dr Bob Brown, Penny Wong, Grant Chapman, John McLaren and Gary Sauer-Thompson) then put forward their party policies. They are as follows:

DEMOCRATS – Return 1500 GL, and hold a referendum to put the Murray under Federal control

GREENS – Return 3000 GL, the first 1500 GL over 5 years

LIBERAL/NATIONAL COALITION – Return 500 GL over 5 years as a 'first step', Commonwealth funding: \$200m

ALP – Return 1500 GL over 10 years, Commonwealth funding: \$200m 'first step' plus extra \$150m.

There is no doubt that Murray Cod, red gums and other native species have declined in range and abundance. The habitats for some of these species have become very fragmented. The system has lost much of its ecological integrity.

If we do nothing more, there will be extinctions. Like the Tasmanian tiger, the Murray Cod could remain only as a colourful label for a bottle of beer.

Keith Walker – Freshwater Ecologist, Adelaide University

I often wonder what is an elder fisherman doing on a forum like this with professors and doctors.

Then I think, well, who knows the river better than me, whose family has been closely involved for six generations, who better to tell you what it was like and how it has changed in a very short time...

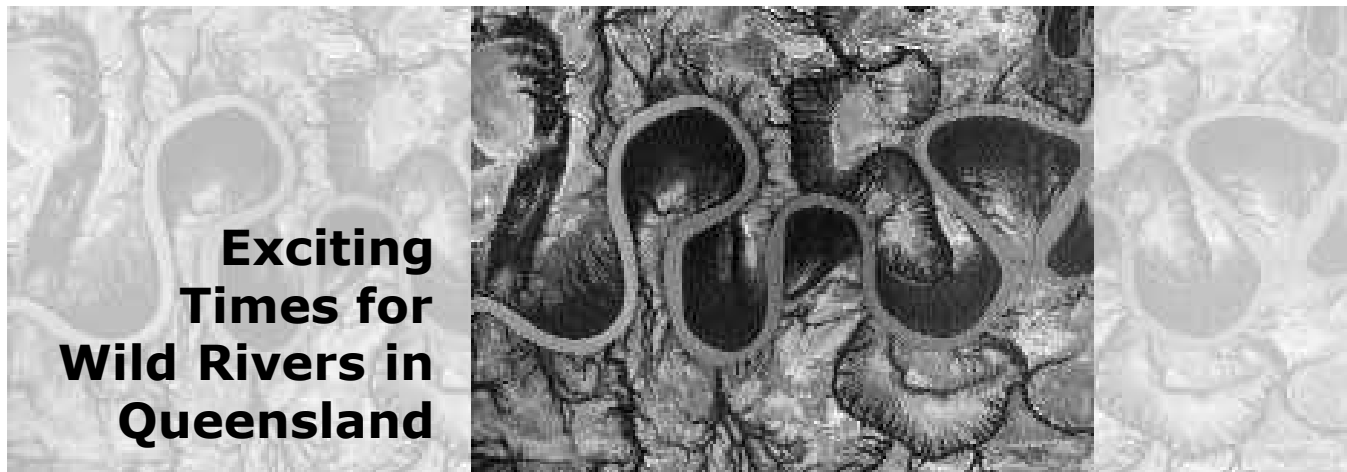
All Australians including my family have taken from the Murray for so long.

Now it is time for us all to put something back.

Henry Jones – commercial fisherman from the Coorong

The meeting concluded with participants passing a resolution calling on all political parties to commit an additional \$500 million in Commonwealth funds to restore 1500 GL in extra annual flows over ten years.

Peter Owen is the River Murray Campaigner for the Conservation Council of South Australia.



Exciting Times for Wild Rivers in Queensland

Gregory River, Gulf of Carpentaria, one of the rivers proposed for protection under the Queensland Wild Rivers Policy. (R.Rudd Photography/Northair Surveys.N.Q.)

by Larissa Cordner

The Franklin River campaign that moved a nation in the 70s led the way for The Wilderness Society (TWS) to establish a Queensland Wild Rivers campaign in 1999. Large holes in Queensland river management were becoming obvious and highlighted through the implementation of the *Water Act 2000*, which offered no protection for wild rivers from threatening activities such as dam building and land clearing.

Calls for cotton and associated dams to facilitate an irrigated agricultural industry were being heard in wild river catchments throughout Queensland. Fueled by the much publicised plight of the Murray Darling Basin, the general public were concerned that implementing the same practices in the north would leave disastrous environmental consequences and large tax bills for future generations. It was the dawning of the Queensland Wild Rivers campaign.

The campaign first focused on the Paroo, the last wild river in the Murray Darling Basin. The Paroo River received protection on the 18th of July 2003 through a historic agreement between the Queensland and New South Wales governments. The agreement recognised the unique

environmental and cultural values of the Paroo.

At the same time, TWS worked to raise awareness of the wild river systems of the North and West of Queensland. Cape York, the Gulf of Carpentaria and the Georgina-Diamantina and Cooper all warranted a mention for high conservation value rivers and had been noted through the Australian Heritage Commission's wilderness index.

Renewed vigour was put into the campaign, and a policy paper was produced by the Queensland Conservation Council (QCC) and TWS that spelled out where these wild rivers were, the activities that should be stopped to safeguard them and how they could be protected through existing legislation or a Wild Rivers Act.

Our voice was heard, and during the recent Queensland state election an announcement was made by the Labor Party: if re-elected, stand-alone legislation would be introduced to protect Wild Rivers for all time. In what seemed a certain victory for Beattie and his team, the champagne glasses were raised in toast almost immediately. And on 7 February 2004

the Queensland public voted to support this initiative (and many others!).

The Wild Rivers Act will be implemented within a year, and though it's a great start, there's more to include. The policy document currently identifies 19 wild rivers in Queensland, the majority of which are in Cape York and three in the Gulf of Carpentaria. TWS and QCC are now focused on delivering outcomes for wild rivers that were not mentioned in the policy announcement by pushing for inclusion of a tiered system of river protection. Queensland's Wild Rivers can rest assured, we will do our best!

Larissa Cordner is Wild Rivers campaigner for The Wilderness Society. For more information call (07) 3846 1420.



Basin News

Groundwater sharing plans delayed

The NSW Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources announced it was deferring commencement of the groundwater sharing plans for the Lower Macquarie, Lower Lachlan, Lower Murrumbidgee, Upper and Lower Namoi, and Lower Gwydir groundwater systems until July 2005.

The reason for the delay was that it had become clear that reductions were needed in the overall volume allocated for consumptive use.

Court finds farmer guilty of illegal landclearing

The Federal Court of Australia has found Moree wheat farmer Ron Greentree guilty of violating the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Act by clearing 100 hectares of his property within the Ramsar listed Gwydir wetlands. The cleared portion of the property had been included in the Ramsar site under a previous owner.

Greentree's company may face millions of dollars in fines.

Draft listing of Lachlan ecological community

The Independent Fisheries Scientific Community has proposed to list the aquatic ecological community of the Lower Lachlan as endangered under the *NSW Fisheries Management Act 1994*. The proposed listing would include fish and aquatic invertebrates in all the tributaries of the Lachlan below major storages.

PAROO AND WARREGO RIVERS

Small floods from Queensland rains ran these rivers during January and February, replenishing water holes and filling wetlands.

LOWER DARLING

Hundreds of large Murray Cod (over 10 kg) were lost in a fish kill between Menindee Lakes and Pooncarie. Preliminary investigations by NSW Fisheries indicate the cause was low dissolved oxygen in the drought- and irrigation-starved river, exacerbated by high temperatures, but a final determination is pending.

CHOWILLA WETLANDS

An emergency watering program was instituted to prevent thousands of river red gums from dying in the Chowilla floodplain. While the program is a much needed last-ditch measure, it is widely recognised that higher flows will be needed to secure the Chowilla wetlands' future.

MURRAY MOUTH

The barrages that regulate freshwater releases to the ocean were scheduled to be opened in September 2004 after being closed for 10 consecutive months. There have been no flows to the ocean for 30 of the past 32 months.



Across the Basin



NARRAN AND CULGOA RIVERS
Heavy January and February rains in the Darling Downs provided a small flow into the Ramsar listed Narran Lake Nature Reserve. The flows were severely impacted by extraction in Queensland. However, the arriving water stimulated field work on the MDBC-funded Narran Lakes project and gave thirsty vegetation a much needed drink.

GWYDIR
Good January rains provided a small flood that wet parts of the Ramsar listed Gwydir Wetlands.

MACQUARIE
The Macquarie catchment continued dry – with fourth consecutive season with little nesting by waterbirds. A community biodiversity and cultural heritage survey was held in the Macquarie Marshes Nature Reserve during March.

LACHLAN
The Lachlan River continued to set records for dryness. The valley is now in uncharted waters, experiencing a new drought of record which should change the shares of water currently established in the Water Sharing Plan.

MURRAY CHANNEL
The Murray-Darling Basin Commission opened a set of fishways at Locks 7 and 8 downstream of the Darling River confluence. The opening marks the tangible beginnings of MDBC’s fishway program, which is designed to provide 2300 km of fish passage from the sea to Hume Dam.

New Publication!

The comprehensive guide to freshwater protected areas in Australia available now.

The Australian Freshwater Protected Area Sourcebook: The policy background, role and importance of protected areas for Australian inland aquatic ecosystems

Jon Nevill and Ngaire Phillips
 Editors for the ASL Representative Freshwater Reserves Working Group.

In September 2000, the Australian Society for Limnology (ASL) established a working group to examine the issue of representative reserves in inland aquatic environments. *The Australian Freshwater Protected Area Sourcebook* is the product of that investigation, and examines government commitments and programs in the light of information related to the use of the 'protected area' concept in inland waters.

According to the international *Convention on Biological Diversity 1992*, the conservation of aquatic biodiversity involves the protection of representative examples of all major ecosystem types, coupled with the sympathetic management of ecosystems outside these protected areas. Although the Australian government, and all eight Australian states and territories are committed to this principle, only Victoria, Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory have funded specific programs aimed at meeting this commitment. Although all jurisdictions have established terrestrial reserves (Ramsar sites, for example) which protect aquatic ecosystems, the degree to which such reserves protect representative ecosystems has not been assessed. The paper examines the policy background, history, role and importance of protected areas for the conservation of inland aquatic ecosystems in Australia.

The purpose of the monograph is to promote discussion of all issues surrounding the development of freshwater protected areas, including their limitations. The importance of representative protected areas provides a focus for the document. It is structured to allow the reader to find specific information on a particular issue quickly, without having to peruse the entire paper. The degree of detailed technical information provided establishes the paper as a sourcebook as well as a discussion paper.

The book comprises 11 core chapters (including a summary) making up roughly 100 pages, with a further 14 appendices adding another 100 pages. A separate bibliography is provided through an internet link.

The term 'reserve' is used in the book to encompass the first four of the IUCN's protected area categories. The bulk of the core text is devoted to chapters discussing:

- the historical development of protected areas in terrestrial and marine environments
- threats to the freshwater environment, and the role of freshwater protected areas
- the development of national, state and regional inventories of freshwater ecosystems to underpin the identification and selection of protected areas
- national and state programs for the protection of aquatic environments
- a hypothetical framework for protecting rivers of high conservation value, including a discussion of Canada's Heritage Rivers
- difficulties faced by aquatic reserves which are not faced by terrestrial reserves
- conclusions and recommendations.

The book makes recommendations relating to the development of comprehensive inventories of inland aquatic ecosystems in all Australian jurisdictions, and also recommends the development of a national framework for the establishment of inland aquatic protected areas.

A recommendation is made that the ASL develop a short formal policy document on the use of protected areas in inland aquatic ecosystems.

Appendices examine national and state freshwater conservation programs in more detail, as well as providing technical information on matters relating to international agreements, establishing site value, classification methods, the Canadian Heritage Rivers System, and extracts from key documents.

The Freshwater Protected Area Sourcebook is available in hard copy by contacting Dr. Andrew Boulton at the University of New England at (02) 6773 3760. It is also available through either Jon Nevill's website: www.onlyone-planet.com.au, or the ASL's website www.asl.org.au. A direct link to the document is at www.users.bigpond.com/jon.nevill/FW_ProtectedArea_Sourcebook.doc



Freshwater Protected Areas

New and Existing Tools for Conserving Freshwater Ecosystems
A National Conference

Faculty of Nursing, University of Sydney, Camperdown NSW
September 27 and 28, 2004

ABOUT THE CONFERENCE

Protected areas are a cornerstone of terrestrial and marine biodiversity conservation, but are relatively unknown when it comes to freshwater ecosystems.

However, aquatic habitats do receive varying levels of protection in Australia from existing approaches such as conservation reserves, Ramsar sites, catchment and riparian management and Indigenous Protected Areas, and new initiatives are being announced ever more frequently. In the first half of 2004 alone:

- the Queensland Government committed to passing a Wild Rivers Act
- Land & Water Australia commissioned a report on protecting Australia's high conservation value aquatic ecosystems
- the National Water Initiative recognised the need to identify and protect aquatic systems of high conservation value.

With protected areas finally making their way onto the freshwater conservation agenda, the Inland Rivers Network and WWF Australia believe the time is ripe for taking stock of our existing efforts and finding a way forward to a national framework for freshwater protected areas.

PROGRAM

Day 1 – Monday 27 September 2004

The Freshwater Protected Areas Toolkit: Existing programs and new innovations

- *Session 1:* Approaches from the states, territories and Commonwealth
- *Session 2:* Innovations in freshwater areas conservation

Day 2 – Tuesday 28 September 2004

Putting the Toolkit to Work: Management challenges and community involvement

- *Session 3:* Reserve selection & managing impacts
- *Session 4:* Involving the community

Conference Dinner

IRN and WWF would like to invite all conference delegates, along with friends and spouses, to attend a special conference dinner with guest speaker Bob Morrish of the Cooper Creek Protection Group. Numbers are limited so register early.

When: 7.00pm, Monday 27 September

Where: Thanh Binh Vietnamese Restaurant
111 King St, Newtown

Cost: \$40.00

For more conference information visit the IRN website:
www.irnsw.org.au

REGISTRATION

Name _____
 Organisation _____
 Tel _____ Fax _____
 Mobile _____
 Postal Address _____
 Postcode _____
 Email _____
 Special dietary requirements: Vegetarian

Registration Fee (inclusive of GST)

Tick the appropriate box

- Corporate/ Government \$300
- Local Government \$250
- Individual/NGO \$110
- Concession \$70
- Optional Dinner \$40

(Lunch is included in the registration fee)

Method of Payment

- Cheque Money Order Diners Amex
 Visa MasterCard Bankcard

Cardholder's name _____

Cardholder's signature _____

Card No. / / /

Expiry date /

Please make cheques and money orders payable to the Australian Conservation Foundation (ABN 22 007 498 482), which is providing administrative and financial services to IRN for this conference. Send with your registration details to:

IRN, Level 1, 29 Shepherd St, Chippendale NSW 2008
Tel: 02 9212 5112 **Fax:** 02 9212 6977 or
Email: coordinator@irnsw.org.au

This registration form will serve as a tax invoice for GST for payments of less than \$1,000.

Information regarding accommodation and directions/public transportation to the conference is available at www.irnsw.org.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:
Water for Rivers Fund
Inland Rivers Network
Level 1,
29-35 Shepherd St
Chippendale NSW 2008

**Surface
Mail**

**Postage
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Australia**

Inland Rivers Network

Level 1, 29-35 Shepherd Street, Chippendale NSW 2008
Tel: 02 9212 5112 Fax: 02 9212 6977 Mob: 0407 279 088
E-mail: coordinator@irnsw.org.au
Web: www.irnsw.org.au
ABN: 34 373 750 383



IRN Conference Proceedings – Available Now

■ **The Way Forward on Weirs** ■ **What's Going Down with Weirs** (Both available on CD-ROM)

Approximately 20,000 man-made structures block the waterways of southeastern Australia. The ecological damage has been enormous.

Taken from the IRN-hosted conference of the same name, *The Way Forward on Weirs* addresses the effects of weirs on the environment, modifying weir operations to reduce environmental impacts, and weir removal.

What's Going Down with Weirs, the proceedings of the most recent IRN workshop, picks up where *The Way Forward* left off, with updates on weir management from each state, presentations on fish passage, and joint recommendations on weir management from IRN and the Queensland Conservation Council.

■ **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.

The Thermal Pollution Workshop, held at Lake Hume in June 2002, brought together a diversity of expertise from scientists to engineers, professionals in water resources, fisheries and conservation management – people with first hand experiences of the thermal pollution problem.

■ **Order these proceedings by calling (02) 9212 5112 or visit www.irnsw.org.au.**