



# Inland Rivers Network News

Summer 2005

## Conference Calls for National System of 'River Parks'

A crowd of over 100 participants at the recent Inland Rivers Network/WWF Australia conference, *Freshwater Protected Areas: New and existing tools for conserving freshwater ecosystems*, issued an urgent call to action to Australia's governments and environmental agencies: It is time to give our most treasured freshwater ecosystems the protection equivalent to national park status. In a conference statement containing over 30 detailed findings and recommen-

dations, conference participants called on the Council of Australian Governments to negotiate a national agreement for protecting freshwater ecosystems of high conservation value across Australia.

Held 27 and 28 September in Sydney, *Freshwater Protected Areas* was the first national conference on freshwater protected areas in Australia and the latest in a line of IRN/WWF collaborations that have included conferences

on weirs management and removal, cold water pollution, and fish stocking.

Over 30 speakers representing environmental groups, conservation agencies, the scientific community, indigenous groups and anglers addressed topics as diverse as the conference participants themselves – freshwater protected areas management in each of the states, partnerships between irrigators and

*Cont. on page 2*

## NSW docked for not sharing with environment

The Australian Government Treasurer has suspended \$26 million in national competition payments to New South Wales because its water sharing plans fail to provide adequate environmental flows to stressed and overallocated rivers.

"This decision only confirms what is apparent from declining waterbird numbers, struggling native fish populations and parched river red gums – our rivers and wetlands are dying from government inaction," said Brendan Fletcher, Coordinator for the Inland Rivers Network.

The Treasurer acted upon the recommendation of the National Competition Council, which is charged with assessing each state's progress against the 1994 water reforms agreed on by the Council of Australian Governments (CoAG). The reforms include a commitment to provide adequate environmental flows to stressed and overallocated rivers.

If states fail to make adequate progress in water reform, the Competition Council has the authority to recommend suspensions or reductions in national competition payments from the Commonwealth to the states. In December, the Competition Council recommended a 10 percent suspension - \$26 million - in New South Wales' payment. The Treasurer accepted the recommendation.

"For years our rivers and wetlands have suffered because the government has been dragging its feet on environmental flows – and now the state budget is suffering because of this government's environmental failures," said Rachael Young, Water Policy Officer for the Nature Conservation Council of NSW.

New South Wales can recover the \$26 million lost if it takes action to improve its record before the 2005 assessment of water reform progress. The 2005 assessment will be carried out by the newly formed National Water Commission.

"Losing \$26 million in national competition payments is the wake-up call this government appears to need," said Mr. Fletcher. "The government needs to act now, not later, to recover water for the environment."

"The New South Wales government has been given one last chance," said Ms Young. "It must respond by improving the current water sharing plans and developing serious, science-based strategies for providing water to key wetlands and rivers."

New South Wales was the only state penalised by the National Competition Council for failing to provide adequate flows to the environment.

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environmental groups and managing freshwater ecosystems for indigenous cultural values, just to name a few. The conference statement was crafted collaboratively after two days of presentations, workshops, networking and a lively conference dinner featuring Bob Morrish, legendary conservationist of the Cooper Creek Protection Group, as the dinner speaker.

The conference was designed by the organisers to meet several objectives: most immediately, to provide a forum for freshwater areas conservation scientists, planners, managers and activists to share their ideas and experience with colleagues from around Australia; more broadly, to provide the scientific, policy and political basis for a national framework and state implementing legislation for establishing comprehensive freshwater protected areas networks across Australia; and finally, to raise the profile of freshwater protected areas across important stakeholder groups and within government.

Such publicity is sorely needed. While protected areas are a cornerstone of terrestrial and marine biodiversity conservation, and a familiar concept generally in conservation with Australia's well-known national parks system, protected areas are relatively unknown when it comes to conserving freshwater ecosystems. No national approach exists for coordinating freshwater areas conservation, and no quantitative national targets exist to encourage aquatic protection.

However, aquatic habitats do receive varying levels of protection 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 high conservation value freshwater 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, WWF Australia and the conference participants believe the time is ripe for finding a way forward to a national framework for freshwater protected areas.

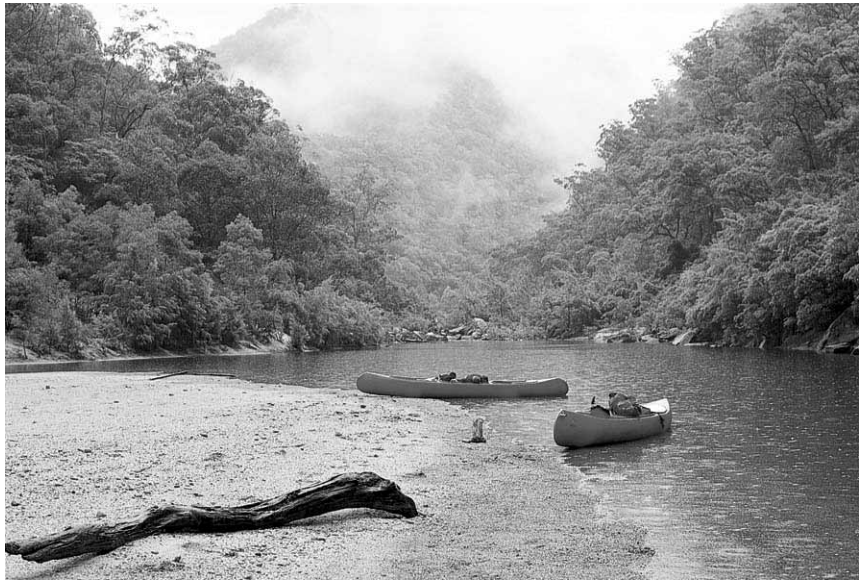
For more information on the conference and the full conference statement, turn to pages 4–9. IRN and WWF Australia expect to publish the full conference proceedings in early 2005.

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## Editor's Note

*The Kowmung River currently receives some protection within Blue Mountains National Park, but the rivers of NSW have no parks system of their own.*



*Photo: NSW Department of Environment and Conservation*

Kosciusko, Blue Mountains National Park, Dorrigo... just saying these words brings to mind images of some of New South Wales' most beloved places. Not coincidentally, these are also some of the state's most important places for biodiversity conservation.

Since 1879, with the establishment of the Royal National Park, protected areas such as national parks have served as the foundation for conserving Australia's native animals and plants. But for too long we have limited our efforts to protecting terrestrial areas. Although there is legislative authority for declaring wild rivers in the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974* and authority for declaring freshwater aquatic reserves in the *Fisheries Management Act 1994*, there is not a single dedicated freshwater protected area in New South Wales.

Hard to believe, isn't it? New South Wales is home to some of Australia's most famed rivers – the headwaters of the Murray and the Snowy, the length of the Darling, the Clarence with some of the last populations of trout cod – but not one of these rivers has a designation comparable to our treasured national parks.

Aquatic ecosystems do receive some protection through a variety of mechanisms, from inclusion in terrestrial parks to Ramsar designation, but such protection is uncoordinated and managers often lack the variety of tools needed for truly integrated management of aquatic ecosystems. It is not enough.

New South Wales needs a comprehensive, adequate and representative system of freshwater protected areas; it needs the legislation to bring such a system into being; and it needs the support of a national framework for freshwater protected areas.

Fortunately, these goals are within reach. In Queensland, the Beattie Government has committed to developing Wild Rivers legislation. Land & Water Australia recently commissioned a report on protecting high conservation value freshwater ecosystems, and a recent paper on directions for the National Reserve System recommended that freshwater ecosystems be incorporated within the system. The pieces are coming together, but the picture

will not be complete without a system of freshwater protected areas in New South Wales.

*This article on freshwater protected areas was originally published in Environment NSW, the quarterly newsletter of the Nature Conservation Council of NSW, in Spring 2004.*

\* \* \*

If it is not already apparent from our cover story and this editor's note, let it be noted that the campaign for freshwater protected areas in New South Wales and around Australia is one of IRN's top priorities for 2005. We have plenty of information on freshwater protected areas in this issue, with more conference information on pages 4 to 7 and the text of a World Conservation Council resolution on freshwater protected area sponsored by three IRN member groups - the Nature Conservation Council of NSW, National Parks Association NSW and the Australian Conservation Foundation - on pages 8 and 9. Needless to say, with such stellar support the resolution passed! The International Union for the Conservation of Nature, the largest conservation organisation in the world, is now officially committed to promoting freshwater protected areas in all of its member countries, including Australia.

But as always, there's a lot more on our plate. On pages 10-11 we have the latest on the Living Murray and the National Water Initiative, on pages 14-15 we have two articles on NSW's rural water supplier, State Water. We also have the latest news from 'water world', from aquatic habitat rehabilitation to the WaterKeepers Australia launch.

As always, if you have a story idea or some comments, drop us a line.

Brendan Fletcher

# Freshwater Protected Areas - New and existing tools for conserving freshwater ecosystems

**A national conference  
27-28 Sept 2004  
University of Sydney**



*Dr Bob Morrish describing the battle to save Cooper Creek, conference dinner.  
Photo: Sue Lennox.*

I commend the members of this conference and thank them for their continued diligence and care for this land and the waterways which I hold dear. I hope that their recommendations are well received by participating bodies and by the government on a whole and are acted upon in a hasty manner to keep one of the mightiest river systems in the world alive and well for all our children and grandchildren. To not take heed will see the once proud, swift flowing Dhungala of my childhood die and from that there will be no return. What will we then say to the children of Australia, non-Indigenous and Indigenous?

*- Henry Atkinson, elder of the Yorta Yorta Nation*

## Conference Statement and Recommendations

### Statement

We, the participants of the first national conference on Freshwater Protected Areas, find that

1. Australia's freshwater ecosystems are priceless and unique natural, social, economic and cultural assets.
2. Urgent action is needed to protect and rehabilitate freshwater ecosystems across Australia.
3. Australians are concerned about river health and the security of freshwater ecosystems.
4. All Australians have a duty of care towards our freshwater ecosystems to ensure their long-term security.
5. Freshwater ecosystems are defined for the purposes of this document to include rivers, wetlands, floodplains, lakes, inland saline ecosystems, estuaries, karst and other subterranean ecosystems, springs and groundwater dependent ecosystems.
6. Protected areas are a cornerstone of biodiversity conservation in terrestrial and marine ecosystems, and should also be a foundation for conserving freshwater ecosystems.
7. Development of a comprehensive, adequate and representative (CAR) system of freshwater protected areas should form a core component of a nationally coordinated approach to protecting freshwater ecosystems.
8. Significant opportunities exist to develop and effectively manage a network of freshwater protected areas across less impacted areas of Australia, notably in tropical and arid- and semi-arid-zone river systems. In these landscapes, the management of whole river systems to maintain and



*Southern Gulf of Carpentaria, with the permission of the Ganggalidda people.  
Photo by Russell Kelly*

Given the continuing decline of inland aquatic ecosystems over much of the Australian continent, it is now urgent that the development of comprehensive, adequate and representative inland aquatic protected areas be elevated, nationwide, as a high priority. In addition to the protection of representative ecosystems, unique and vulnerable aquatic ecosystems need to be identified and protected. A national freshwater protected area framework needs to be developed.

*- Jon Nevill, co-author of The Australian Freshwater Protected Area Resourcebook*

enhance freshwater ecosystems is not only possible, but is a national imperative.

9. There is a pressing need for formal protection and rehabilitation of aquatic ecosystems of high conservation value in more developed parts of southern and eastern Australia, using both new and existing tools such as Ramsar-listed wetlands or conservation reserves.

10. Traditional Owners have lived along rivers, wetlands and estuaries across Australia for tens of thousands of years and have an inherent right and vital role to play in their management. Non-Indigenous Australians have much to learn from Indigenous communities about how to care for freshwater ecosystems.

11. Protecting less impacted freshwater ecosystems is significantly more cost effective than rehabilitating degraded freshwater ecosystems.

12. Comprehensive efforts for freshwater ecosystems usually entail both protection and rehabilitation.

13. Many useful tools exist for protecting freshwater ecosystems, including site-specific tools (such as protected areas, property management planning, Ramsar designation, heritage rivers and covenants) and catchment management tools (such as natural resources and fisheries management, land-use planning and providing environmental water for river health). However, there has been a lack of both political will and resources to use these tools effectively.

14. Emerging river protection tools provide innovative mechanisms for river protection, notably Wild Rivers listing by State and Territories, Heritage River listing under the federal *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act*, the proposed Australian Heritage River Systems, aquatic or fisheries reserve establishment under State and Territory fisheries laws, and formal environmental water provisions.

15. While much is already being done by Governments, landholders and communities to protect and rehabilitate some freshwater systems, efforts need to be dramatically improved if future generations are to inherit an ecologically healthy Australia.

## Recommendations for Action

The conference participants agree that a nationally coordinated approach to protecting freshwater ecosystems should be based upon the following recommendations:

1. The Council of Australian Governments should negotiate an Agreement, as a matter of priority, to drive the development of a national strategy and programs for identifying, classifying, and protecting freshwater ecosystems of high conservation value across Australia.

2. A national inter-jurisdictional program should be established to work towards a nationally-consistent approach to the classification and inventory of freshwater ecosystems.

3. A nationally applicable decision support system to drive the appropriate use of existing and emerging freshwater protection tools should be developed.

4. The vast majority of freshwater ecosystems of high conservation value occur outside the formal reserve system. A nationally coordinated approach to protecting freshwater ecosystems must be applied across all land tenures throughout Australia, using new and existing freshwater protection tools.

5. In northern and central Australia, which retain many of Australia's less impacted freshwater ecosystems, development of a comprehensive, adequate and representative protected area system should occur in tandem with

*Cont. on page 6*

# Freshwater Protected Areas - New and existing tools for conserving freshwater ecosystems

*Cont. from page 5*

comprehensive protection of freshwater ecosystems and native vegetation through whole-of-catchment mechanisms.

6. In more developed systems, such as in parts of southern Australia, development of a comprehensive, adequate and representative protected area system should occur in tandem with targeted rehabilitation.

7. Traditional Owners and non-Indigenous landholders manage vast areas of high conservation value freshwater ecosystems across Australia; they should be supported and encouraged in their efforts through management planning that specifically addresses freshwater ecosystem protection, and by the provision of incentives and information.

8. Partnerships with Indigenous peoples need to be formed to protect freshwater ecosystems. Traditional Knowledge Systems should form a key basis for the management of freshwater protected areas.

9. Where landholders have voluntarily established freshwater protected areas on their land, governments should provide greater support to ensure that the values of those areas are protected from off-site impacts, such as from reduced river flows.

10. Obstacles to the full use of existing, but to date under-utilised, tools for protecting freshwater ecosystems should be reviewed and addressed.

11. The establishment of an Australian Heritage River System should be investigated, as proposed by Kingsford

*et al* in a report commissioned by Land and Water Australia (in press).

12. Levels of 'adequacy' of protection of freshwater ecosystems, in relation to a comprehensive, adequate and representative approach to protection, should be investigated.

13. Secure, long term funding mechanisms for the establishment and management of freshwater protected areas should be established.

14. Inter-agency and inter-jurisdictional coordination to achieve a stable framework for managing freshwater protected areas should be enhanced.

15. Precautionary policies and protection mechanisms should explicitly address the cumulative impacts on freshwater ecosystems at the catchment scale.

16. Governments should make full use of existing legal provisions to protect existing freshwater protected areas

17. Legal and policy frameworks for catchment and water management planning should explicitly provide for the identification, maintenance and enhancement of the conservation values of freshwater protected areas.

18. The capacity of communities to lead the establishment and management of freshwater protected areas across land tenures, both public and otherwise, should be enhanced.

19. New and innovative partnerships for establishing and managing freshwater protected areas should be developed through building bridges and meaningful community engagement across all communities in a catchment.

A national framework for protection that establishes different tiers of importance for rivers, estuaries and wetlands can work if supported by states, territories and the Australian Government. . . . An Australian Heritage Rivers system could be established for whole of river basin protection driven primarily by river communities. For adequate protection of dependent ecosystems, the many protection mechanisms that exist need to work within a catchment scale. These include protected areas (including aquatic reserves) acquisition and management, environmental flows, natural resource management and incentives.

*- Richard Kingsford, formerly Principal Research Scientist, NSW Department of Environment and Conservation*

## Australian Rivers and Wetland Protection Push Endorsed

*By Dr Judy Messer*

The future protection of freshwater areas is more assured with the passing of a strong resolution at the 3rd World Conservation Congress held by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in Bangkok, Thailand, in November. The motion was sponsored by the Nature Conservation Council of NSW (NCC), National Parks Association of NSW and the Australian Conservation Foundation.

The IUCN is the largest conservation organisation in the world with over 1000 member organisations from both non-government and government sectors. More than 3500 people registered at this unique global event.

‘The resolution calls on all countries to establish protected areas for all freshwater ecosystems, including rivers, lakes, wetlands, estuaries and groundwater dependent ecosystems,’ said Dr Judy Messer, NCC Vice-Chair and the NCC delegate at the Congress.

The resolution also calls for freshwater protected area systems to be established within an integrated river basin management approach, using a range of protected area options, and for countries to develop and implement national action plans on these issues.

‘Countries that are party to the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD) should implement the targets adopted in the CBD Program of Work on Protected Areas, February 2004,’ said Ms Anne Reeves, the delegate for the National Parks Association of NSW.

The Inland Rivers Network, which helped develop the motion for the sponsor, is ‘pleased that the resolution calls on the IUCN to put more effort into the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands,’ said IRN Coordinator Brendan Fletcher. ‘It is a great follow-up to the Freshwater Protected Areas Conference the IRN convened in Sydney several months ago.’

‘The motion was supported by the Australian Government so we are looking forward to stronger action in all states of Australia,’ stated Dr Messer. ‘We particularly expect more action in NSW, where many rivers, wetlands and other freshwater ecosystems are in dire straits, including dedicated Ramsar wetlands in the inland.’

*Please see the following page for the motion in full.*



*Photos from Murray Darling Basin Commission*



# Freshwater Protected Areas - New and existing tools for conserving freshwater ecosystems

*Cont. from page 7*

NCC Water Policy Officer Rachael Young enjoys the conference dinner and conversation.  
Photo: Sue Lennox



Governments and the whole community must accept responsibility and act NOW if we are to have any wetlands left for our future generations.

- Eric Fisher, landholder, grazier and private Ramsar Manager in the Macquarie Marshes

## 3rd IUCN World Conservation Congress Bangkok 17-25 November 2004 CGR3.RES039 Freshwater Protected Areas

RECALLING Recommendation 19.38 (*Targets for Protected Areas Systems*), of the 19th Session of the IUCN General Assembly (Buenos Aires, 1994), as well as Recommendation 16 of the IVth World Parks Congress (Caracas, 1992), which urged governments to ensure that protected areas should cover a minimum of 10 percent of each biome by the year 2000;

RECALLING that Recommendation 17.38 (*Protection of the Coastal and Marine Environment*), adopted by the 17th Session of the IUCN General Assembly (San Jose, 1988), Recommendation 1.37 (*Marine Protected Areas*), adopted by the 1st Session of the World Conservation Congress (Montreal, 1996), and Resolution 2.20 (*Conservation of marine biodiversity*), adopted by the 2nd Session of the World Conservation Congress` (Amman, 2000), support the establishment of protected areas in marine aquatic environments;

RECALLING that Resolution 2.47 (*Conservation of the last wild rivers of Europe*), adopted by the 2nd Session of the World Conservation Congress (Amman, 2000), urges IUCN to review and promote development of an international classification of river categories according to their degree of naturalness;

RECALLING that Recommendation V.31 (*Protected Areas, freshwater and integrated river basin management frameworks*), noted by the Vth IUCN World Parks Congress (Durban, 2003), supports the establishment and implementation of integrated river basin management in which networks of protected areas and regimes of protection are a key development strategy;

RECALLING that Decision VII/2 of the 7th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (Kuala Lumpur, 2004) adopts a goal of establishing and maintaining comprehensive, adequate and representative systems of protected inland water ecosystems within the framework of integrated catchment/watershed/river basin management;

CONCERNED that the use of freshwater resources and the rate of degradation of freshwater habitats are increasing;

ALSO CONCERNED that the World Wide Fund For Nature's Living Planet Index indicates that freshwater biodiversity has declined at a greater rate than in either the forest or marine biomes, declining by 55% from 1970-2000;

FURTHER CONCERNED that an estimated 17% of freshwater fish species in the 20 countries for which assessments were most complete are classified by the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species as threatened with extinction;

COMMITTED to the adoption of integrated river basin management as an essential means of achieving sustainable use of freshwater ecosystems and of maintaining aquatic biological diversity;

ACKNOWLEDGING there is an urgent need to ensure that a substantial portion of all ecosystems is conserved to act as reference, replenishment and refuge areas;

CONVINCED that freshwater protected areas represent an important method for conserving freshwater biodiversity and contributing to the sustainable use of freshwater resources;

NOTING that the IUCN Guidelines for Protected Area Management Categories identify a range of protected area types and that systems of protected areas in freshwater environments should be complemented by systems of integrated river basin management; and

NOTING further that wetlands may be specifically protected through listing under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, a treaty focussed on conservation and wise use of a particular biome and encompassing the world's largest protected areas network for wetlands.

The World Conservation Congress at its 3rd Session in Bangkok, Thailand, 17-25 November 2004:

1. RECOMMENDS that all States:

(a) establish protected areas representative of all freshwater ecosystems, including but not limited to riverine, lacustrine, wetland, estuarine and groundwater dependent ecosystems, in cooperation with local communities and resource users, so as to safeguard the biodiversity of each of their freshwater ecosystems, and set targets for protection where useful and appropriate;

(b) establish their systems of freshwater protected areas within an integrated river basin management approach taking advantage of the full range of governance types;

(c) as part of their overall programs, establish viable freshwater protected areas, to ensure the inclusion of areas which meet the protection criteria for IUCN Categories I and II.

(d) that are parties to the CBD implement the targets adopted in the CBD Programme of Work on Protected Areas 'COP VII/28' February 2004, in relation to freshwater habitat, including the enhanced implementation of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands; and

(e) develop and implement national action plans on these issues.

2. RECOMMENDS that the World Commission on Protected Areas develop guidance on the application of the IUCN Guidelines for Protected Area Management Categories in freshwater environments.

3. RECOMMENDS FURTHER that IUCN strengthens its work with the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands in order to facilitate better management and assessment, monitoring and reporting on freshwater protected areas, including through application of IUCN's Guidelines for Protected Area Management Category System.

Sponsors:

- Nature Conservation Council of New South Wales
- Australian Conservation Foundation
- National Parks Association of New South Wales



*Jim Tait makes his point over lunch at the FPA conference*



*The network in action: delegates 'shmooze' over sangria at the Freshwater Protected Areas conference dinner*



*Conference sessions provoke valuable discussion*  
*All photos by Sue Lennox*

# Water Reform and the

## Darling forum planned for February

*Editor's note – The following group communique announces a community forum on the future of the Darling Basin to be held in late February. IRN strongly encourages anyone and everyone interested in the ecological health of the Darling Basin to attend this forum. For more information, please contact Brendan Fletcher at 02 9212 5112.*

A group of people with interests from across the Darling Basin came together in Moree at the invitation of the Community Advisory Committee of the Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council on 14 December 2004. The purpose of the gathering was to see if there is a collective desire to consider and actively manage the strategic issues that will determine the future of the Darling Basin, and if so, how and by whom this might best be achieved.

The group recognised that there are many other interested people not present on the day, and that their views are equally valid, and a much wider range of people must be given the opportunity to participate through future forums.

Participants stated their individual areas of interest and identified the issues that they see as being important for the Darling Basin. Several key themes emerged from this discussion and it became apparent that there is a common resolve to seek the best possible future for the 600,000 people who live in the Darling Basin.

The group spoke with one voice of the need for a process that is owned and driven by local communities in the Basin. The best outcomes will be achieved if governments listen to and respect the needs and aspirations of the people. It was agreed that a whole of Darling Basin focus that encompasses the biophysical, social, cultural and economic diversity of the region is essential.

Achieving this will require a social process that recognises and builds on the values of individuals and communities with an interest in the Darling Basin. The decision-making process must respect local knowledge and give power to communities to have a genuine say in the decisions that affect them and future generations.

The conflict caused by the current institutional arrangements (both within and between states) is no longer acceptable to those who suffer the consequences.

The group identified five key themes to be addressed:

- People power
- Knowledge
- Relationships with governments
- Decision-making framework
- The diversity of values within the Darling Basin

The group agreed to hold a public forum in mid to late February in Moree, and requested the CAC to convene a working group to plan the forum. The forum will consider a more fully developed proposition for a Darling initiative.

## One step forward, two to the side

*by Dr Arlene Buchan*

In what's becoming a familiar storyline in the water world, the water reform process moved forward this spring with the passage of the National Water Commission Bill 2004, but on the ground progress was stalled by a funding dispute between the Commonwealth and the states.

First, the good news. The National Water Commission Bill 2004 was passed by the Senate on 8 December 2004. The Bill establishes a new national institution called the National Water Commission (NWC) which will function as an independent statutory body with defined responsibilities for water management in Australia.

Passage of the Bill is a vital step in implementing the National Water Initiative (NWI) Intergovernmental Agreement as agreed by the Commonwealth and all the states and territories except Tasmania and Western Australia at June's COAG meeting.

The Commission will be responsible for reporting back to COAG on implementation of the NWI. The Commission will set national environmental water targets and standards and develop performance indicators to assess progress as well as undertake a baseline assessment of water resources in Australia, water-related research and information and existing water governance arrangements.

In addition to overseeing the implementation of the NWI, the new Commission will be responsible for advising on disbursement of funds under the Commonwealth's \$2 billion dollar Australian Water Fund.

Nevertheless, the source of the Australia Water Fund money is still a key area of conflict between the Commonwealth and states, and resolution of this issue is imperative before either the NWI or implementation of the first step of the Living Murray Initiative can proceed.

The situation has taken on even greater urgency in light of a recent shocking report indicating that the percentage of stressed and dying red gums along one thousand kilometres of the Murray has increased from 51% to 75% over the last 18 months, an increase of nearly 50%.

To break the logjam, a coalition of environment groups including the Australian Conservation Foundation, Environment Victoria, the Nature Conservation Council of New South Wales, the Conservation Council of South Australia and IRN have called on the Prime Minister and Premiers to meet by Christmas as a matter of urgency to resolve the stand-off over funding for the National Water Initiative and agree on emergency measures to save the Murray's red gums and floodplains.

*Dr Arlene Buchan is the Healthy Rivers Campaigner for the Australian Conservation Foundation.*

# Murray Darling Basin

## Report shows skyrocketing water requirements in the MDB

by Peter Owen

A report recently released by the Murray-Darling Basin Commission indicates that irrigated agriculture and its water requirements continue to grow rapidly in the Murray Darling Basin. The report, titled *Quantifying and valuing land use change for Integrated Catchment Management evaluation in the Murray-Darling Basin 1996/7 – 2000/01*, is available at [www.clw.csiro.au/publications/consultancy/](http://www.clw.csiro.au/publications/consultancy/)

The report states the following in its Executive Summary (the report indicates that the results should be considered as estimates only):

- The total Water Requirement of irrigated agricultural land uses in the MDB in 1996/97 was 9,346 GL which increased by nearly 29% to 12,050 GL in 2000/01.
- The total area of irrigated agriculture reported was 1.5 million ha in 1996/97 and 1.8 million ha in 2000/01 – an increase of 22%.
- the irrigated agricultural land use of largest areal extent is Dairy, followed by Cotton, Cereals and Rice.
- The largest users of water for irrigation are also Dairy, followed by Cotton, Rice, Cereals and Grapes.
- Areas of irrigated Dairy pasture expanded by some 217,000ha (71%) and total Water Requirements of Dairy increased by 1,730 GL to a total of 4,194 GL in 2000/01, although there is some uncertainty surrounding these figures.
- Areas of irrigated Cotton expanded by 108,000 ha (36%) and the total Water Requirements of Cotton increased by 729 GL to a total of 2,856 GL in 2000/01.
- Total profit at full equity from agriculture in the MDB in 1996/97 was \$3.856 billion, which decreased slightly to \$3.732 billion in 2000/01.
- The total net economic returns to agriculture in the MDB in 1996/97 was \$3.192 billion. This increased slightly to \$3.199 billion in 2000/01.

The sheer magnitude of this expansion is alarming and emphasises the urgent need to reduce the amount of water being extracted from the MDB for irrigation.

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

## Murray (and cods) a hit with Adelaide voters

by Juliet LeFeuvre

South Australia is at the end of the line for the Murray River. The cumulative impacts of upstream activities end up on Adelaide's doorstep at the mouth of the Murray which is being kept open only by around the clock dredging. Of further concern to Adelaide residents is the fact that at least 40% of the city's drinking water is drawn from the river and WHO forecasts predict that if current trends continue, it will be too salty to drink on 2 days out of 5 by 2020.

The Murray has been an issue of increasing concern with Adelaide voters. ACF, the Conservation Council of SA and other environment NGOs have run a prolonged campaign to raise community awareness. The campaign reached a high point in July with a public meeting attended by over 500 people. Scientists, community members and politicians presented the problems facing the river system and potential solutions, and the meeting passed a unanimous resolution calling on all parties to act to save the Murray. Once the federal election was called, community campaigning went into full swing, with the gauge to show the level of support and the giant cods Murray, Darling and Murrumbidgee familiar sights in the streets and public spaces of Adelaide. Renowned Mildura chef Stefano del Pieri cooked Murray fish next to a boat in Victoria Square and the crowds at AFL games roared their support.

Come October 9, the voters in the seats of Adelaide and Hindmarsh had got the message. They chose to vote in favour of party policies for restoring 1500 GL in environmental flows to the Murray, as recommended by the independent Scientific Reference Panel as the minimum volume of water required to have a chance of returning the river to health. These two seats swung against the national trend, showing that people care about the Murray's health and our environment, and they're willing to vote for it.

Meanwhile, Murray Darling and Murrumbidgee were accorded ABC television's *7.30 Report's* award for 'the most inventive and quietly effective stuffed animal' of the election campaign. High praise indeed when they were competing against an assortment of rats and roosters. They are now resting but ready to take to the streets again in defence of their beleaguered river system.

*Juliet LeFeuvre is the Land and Water Campaigns Assistant for the Australian Conservation Foundation.*

## Cash for Conservation

### DPI Fisheries funds habitat rehabilitation

*by Megan Gallagher, Department of Primary Industries - Fisheries Management*

Fish habitat is critical for the sustainable management of fish stocks. However, many of the estuarine and freshwater habitats for juvenile and adult fish have been degraded or lost through urban, industrial and agricultural development.

Aquatic habitat rehabilitation has become progressively more important in NSW as the community recognises the benefits of natural, healthy systems for native plants and animals, our fisheries resources, the control of pollution and erosion, and the recovery of threatened species.

Over the past decade the NSW Department of Primary Industries (DPI) has played a lead role in rehabilitating fish habitat and native fish populations in NSW.

Recently the Fisheries Management Branch of DPI formalised habitat repair activities with the creation of the Aquatic Habitat Rehabilitation Program (AHR Program) and the formation of a number of strategic partnerships.

The key objectives of the program are to:

- double the area of wetlands under repair
- triple the length of river in which fish have free passage
- increase by four times the area of riparian zone fenced or replanted
- implement a state-wide Resnagging Program
- be able to demonstrate substantial delivery of Threat Abatement Plans developed under the *Fisheries Management Act*.

The AHR team consists of 15 staff and is managed by Craig Copeland (Principal Manager, Aquatic Habitat Rehabilitation). Craig can be contacted at the Richmond Fisheries Office, Ballina on (02) 6686 2018 or [Craig.Copeland@fisheries.nsw.gov.au](mailto:Craig.Copeland@fisheries.nsw.gov.au).

One of the key initiatives that the AHR team is assisting to implement is the Freshwater Habitat Grant Program. The Grant Program is supported by the Recreational Fishing Freshwater Trust Expenditure Committee (RFFTEC) and uses funds from the recreational fishing licence to finance small community-based, freshwater aquatic habitat rehabilitation projects statewide.

Funds are supplied on a matching dollar for dollar basis and up to \$10,000 per year is available for individual projects. The program facilitates direct community input into projects that protect and rehabilitate the freshwater aquatic environment and ultimately benefit recreational fishing.

The first and second round of funding applications have been decided and were announced by the Minister for Primary Industries in early-2003 and mid-2004 respectively. Funding in the order of \$213,000 has been approved for 27 projects, with matching funding in excess of \$450,000 committed as cash and in kind support from project proponents.

Rehabilitation projects approved and underway will ultimately deliver the rehabilitation of approximately 180 hectares of floodplain and wetland habitat, management of 60km of riparian vegetation through replanting and weed removal and fish passage reinstated for more than 60km of river. A small number of projects have been research-based, focusing on issues such as fish passage design and flows to wetlands.

Freshwater fish such as Australian bass, golden perch, the endangered Murray cod, and eastern freshwater cod, freshwater catfish and freshwater mullet will directly benefit from the work to rehabilitate the areas where fish feed, breed and live.

Some of the projects that have been undertaken or are currently underway include:

- removal of willows from 13 locations along Bumbuggan Creek and 15 locations along Goobang Creek near Condobolin by the Mid-Lachlan and Wallamundry creek water users
- rehabilitation of 13km of riparian vegetation along the Macintyre River by the Masterman Landcare Group and the Graman Fishing Club
- modification of a road crossing on Skinners Creek by Ballina Shire Council to allow fish to move freely between the headwaters and the Richmond River Estuary
- remediation of the Faulkland Road causeway, a significant barrier to fish passage at the lower end of the Gloucester River, by Gloucester Shire Council
- in the Eurobodalla Shire, protection of 32 hectares of habitat for Australian bass on the Deua River. The project includes removing weeds such as privet, willows and wild tobacco along the riverbank
- on the Murrumbidgee near Narrandera, monitoring by the Murrumbidgee Wetlands Working Group of the impact of flood on fish movement and behaviour, water quality, aquatic and terrestrial flora and fauna.

The third and final round of funding under the Freshwater Fish Habitat Grant Program will be announced during 2004/05. For more information contact your nearest Department of Primary Industries – Fisheries Management office or log onto [www.fisheries.nsw.gov.au](http://www.fisheries.nsw.gov.au)

# Waterkeepers Australia Up and Running

*by Greg Hunt, National Manager, Waterkeepers Australia*

‘And now, with great pleasure, I declare Waterkeepers Australia officially launched. May it play an ever-increasing role in encouraging and supporting local communities, groups and individuals in their efforts to save and restore the rivers and other waterways which are the life and sustenance of our country.’

With these words, Sir William Deane, Honorary Patron, launched Waterkeepers Australia upon our wide, brown land.

More than 140 representatives of Victoria’s philanthropic, non-government, business and natural resource management community watched as Sir William presented Certificates of Membership to Waterkeepers Australia to the first five members. Here are the stories of two of them.

## Avon Riverkeeper - Victoria



*Avon River at Wellington.  
Photo: Greg Hunt*

A community of mainly dairy-farmers on the Avon River, just east of Sale in Victoria’s Gippsland region, shared a strong belief that they should be involved in important decisions affecting them. When the local water authority did not include them in the decision-making process for agriculture allocations they decided it was time to get active.

They formed the Avon Riverkeeper Association Inc. to help their voices be heard. President, Peter Carroll, is an environmental scientist currently studying for a PhD in waste management. Initial projects have included controlling pest species along the Avon River, lobbying the local water authority on allocation issues and educating the local community about the ecology of their waterway.

## Snowy Estuarykeeper - Victoria



*Not the place for a gas plant, says Snowy Estuarykeeper.  
Photo: Greg Hunt.*

The Snowy is one of our country’s iconic rivers but has degraded to the point of being a national disgrace. The Orbost Angling Club Inc., based around the mouth of the Snowy, decided to do something about it. Their motivation to join Waterkeepers Australia was prompted by a proposal to site an onshore gas plant on Lake Corringale on an estuary of the river.

While the Snowy River Alliance was working hard to rehabilitate the river upstream, the proposal has the potential to wreak real havoc when the Snowy floods. Rob Caune, the Snowy Estuarykeeper, is working to change the site for this gas plant.

The exceptional beauty of the Corringale lagoon has inspired a broad cross-section of the

community to vehemently oppose the industrialisation of the area.

‘We need to participate in our future. We don’t want to just sit on the banks and watch everything happen around us,’ said Caune. ‘The decision to locate such a development there has not so much been perceived as an environmental issue, but as one that is an insult to our common sense.’

## Join Waterkeepers Australia



As our name suggests, Waterkeepers Australia has a national brief. We support communities working for local creeks, rivers, lakes and estuaries. We can help with support for group infrastructure; access to research and the latest knowledge about freshwater and marine ecology, planning and environmental laws; and with increasing the skills base within the group and building capacity to get involved. If your group is involved in protecting your local waterway and you would like more information about Waterkeepers Australia, please go our website [www.waterkeepers.org.au](http://www.waterkeepers.org.au) or contact Greg Hunt, National Manager (03 9347 8310) for further information.

## A New Era for NSW State Water

On 1 July 2004, the *State Water Corporation Act 2004* came into effect, making State Water, which supplies irrigation water throughout New South Wales, a State Owned Corporation, rather than part of the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources.

As part of the new arrangement State Water is to operate under an Operating Licence. At the same time, a new round of water pricing for State Water customers is underway.

Rachael Young and Tony Trujillo have more.

### The State Water operating licence

by Rachael Young, Water Policy Officer, Nature Conservation Council of New South Wales

#### Who is State Water?

State Water is a state-owned corporation that acts as the bulk water supplier for New South Wales except for areas covered by the Sydney Catchment Authority, Sydney Water Corporation and Hunter Water Corporation. Under the act establishing it as a state-owned corporation, its role is to deliver water to its customers, who are irrigators and other regional water users, manage the infrastructure used for water delivery, and do all of this in an ecologically sustainable, socially and financially responsible manner.

State Water has recently undergone some massive overhauls to meet NSW obligations under the National Competition Policy. State Water used to be a part of the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources (albeit a commercial arm) and so the costs and income associated with its activities were blended with DIPNR's overall budget and it also meant that DIPNR was the operator and regulator of water delivery within NSW. In July this year State Water was excised from DIPNR and turned into State Water Corporation, joining the ranks of Sydney Water, Energy Australia, Transgrid and Freight Rail Corporation as a State Owned Corporation (endearingly known as SOCs).

SOCs usually have a monopoly over the resource or service that they offer – State Water is one of these as there are no other bulk water providers in inland NSW. To ensure that the SOCs do not get the wrong idea and jack up prices, offer poor service and try to sell too much product (particularly water) just because they can, the Government has set up the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) to do what its name implies – set prices and regulate State Water's performance. The operating licence is a critical document that ensures that poor service and other unsavoury outcomes are avoided.

#### Why have an Operating Licence?

The corporatisation of State Water presents both risks and opportunities for the environment – opportunities, because corporatisation and the operating licence can lead to a better separation of roles and responsibilities between State Water and DIPNR and greater efficiency; but also risks, because if the Operating Licence and regulatory framework are poorly

designed State Water may be left only with incentives to sell and deliver increasing amounts of water for consumptive use without due regard for the environment.

#### What does it do?

The Operating Licence is critical because it can:

- impose direct environmental obligations
- require reporting on environmental performance and impact
- provide incentives for State Water to lift its environmental performance above minimum regulatory standards
- ensure that there are opportunities for public participation in audits and influencing State Water operations.

In some ways the operating licence is the conduit through which incentives and penalties for good/bad performance flow. It is also an excellent tool for gathering all information about State Water operations (including customer service, environmental obligations) in one place and can – if we have our way – present the public with an integrated view of State Water's performance *and impact*.

#### What do we want in the Operating Licence?

NCC and IRN made a joint submission to IPART on all that we thought State Water and its operations could and should be if the operating licence was well defined and the environmental outcomes we thought had to be included. A brief summary is provided below.

- That the Operating Licence provide opportunities and real incentives (such as money) for State Water to out-perform their operational targets, particularly environmental targets.
- State Water's operations have huge impacts across all of the major inland valleys and we thought it appropriate that State Water monitor some of and report more broadly on these impacts. This would include State Water reproducing reports on all aspects of its regulatory environment (dam safety, fish passage etc) as part of the regular audit to provide a snapshot of State Water operations and performance.
- We were concerned that there are massive gaps in the regulatory framework that State Water is currently

operating within, as many key documents are not yet written. Part of this gap includes the corporate knowledge gaps that exist within DIPNR, DEC and DPI after extensive restructuring. We recommended that the Operating Licence ensures that regulations and responsibilities were clearly defined whilst these issues are sorted out.

- That the Natural Resources Commission be responsible for the audit of State Water’s performance in delivering water as specified in the water sharing plans. DIPNR is currently the designated auditor and we felt that it would be similar to DIPNR auditing itself, as it has major responsibilities under the plans.

- That the Operating Licence includes recommendations by the World Commission on Dams (see Chapter 8 of the Report of the World Commission on Dams – available at [www.dams.org](http://www.dams.org)) which basically requires any structure upgrade or modification to require a re-think of the whole structure and its purpose and consider the impacts of removing the structure.

Our full submission can be found on the NCC website at <http://www.nccsw.org.au/water/projects/Submissions/SWOL04.html>

The State Water Operating Licence is not a recommended topic for after-dinner conversation. However, it is certainly an important subject for discussion by all those who have a love of inland rivers, wetlands, floodplains and fish.

## The role of pricing

*by Tony Trujillo, Economic Policy Officer, WWF Australia*

Historically water has been an under-priced or un-priced resource in Australia. In other words, we have priced water as though it’s free, and as a result we’ve used it as though it’s free. Low water prices encourage over-extraction of water from our river systems, leading to rapidly escalating environmental costs in terms of increased salinity, loss of species and adverse biodiversity impacts.

It costs money to collect and supply water, and water use imposes costs on others. For example extraction of water impacts on wetlands, fish, birds, and other uses of rivers which effects graziers, birdwatchers, fishers, swimmers etc. Water charges have been traditionally limited according to a view that suppliers of water should not abuse any monopoly power they have. Where jurisdictions have started charging for water, the charge is based on trying to recover costs of supply, and more recently starting to include costs of managing water resources, such as putting in fish passageways, providing environmental flows and means to control thermal pollution from dam releases. Given that freshwater ecosystems are in continued decline however, there is no indication that enough is being spent on fixing and managing these problems, and therefore not enough is being passed on in charges for water to reflect them.

WWF-Australia, as an environmental organisation, supports pricing policies that reflect the full value of water and the full cost of repairing environmental damage from water use. Establishing appropriate prices for water will encourage water users to reduce

extractions, improving the ecological integrity of our rivers.

Appropriate pricing of this valuable resource is an important step in balancing the economic and environmental value of water. Both of the major national agreements on water reform – the 1994 COAG agreement and the 2004 National Water Initiative – require that the full cost of water delivery and management, including environmental costs, be incorporated into the price of water. WWF supports these requirements, and also will be advocating the following positions in the 2005-06 water pricing review about to commence with the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal of NSW (IPART):

- All water resource management costs incurred by government agencies should be included in water prices. This means that staff and capital costs for managing and repairing environmental damage are included as well as costs for supplying water users. Although these costs do not represent the total cost to the environment of water use, including them in the cost base is a significant step forward in users bearing the costs of environmental impacts of water extraction and use.
- All costs for new water supply infrastructure, such as upgraded dams or weirs, should be passed on to water users. The ability to recover full costs on new infrastructure should be assessed prior to approving construction. If the price that needs to be charged to recoup the costs of dams recently approved for construction were to be absorbed by users, it is unlikely that many dams currently in existence would have proceeded.

- Community Service Obligations (payments from Treasury to State Water) should not be used to subsidise water prices. Neither should artificial limits on price increases be established to protect marginal farms. If the community determines that in some cases individual farms should be assisted in adjusting to price rises, programs should be established to deal with these issues directly rather than distorting efficient water investment and use decisions.

- It is important that the price of water relate to water usage, so that adjustments to prices result in changes to the amount of water used. Two-tier pricing can be effective, combining a fixed charge for the water entitlement and a charge related to usage.

- Historically water entitlements have allowed irrigators to access water at minimal cost. The introduction of tradeable water rights has allowed water users to achieve significant financial gains by transferring their entitlements. This has provided the mechanism to crystallise a significant transfer of wealth from the community to the private sector by allowing water to be transferred from low to high value users. Since the community owns the water transferred, and the community through government has established the rules enabling the lucrative water trade, there is a strong argument that the community should get at least a proportion of this increased value. WWF urges consideration of including an environmental levy in the price of water charged to users, in order to recover a return to the community and provide a better indication of the value of water. The funds provided should be used to address the environmental impacts of water extraction and use, including restoration of river flows.

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**

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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](http://www.irnsw.org.au).**