



*Limited environmental water supports reed beds and lignum close to the channels of the Great Cumbung Swamp. The wider floodplain has not flooded in 20 years.  
Photo by Patrick Driver, Integrated Monitoring of Environmental Flows Program NSW DWE*

## Water for Wetlands is Water for Life

The Inland Rivers Network has produced a handbook on the importance of restoring high conservation value freshwater areas in the Murray Darling Basin. The handbook has been produced with financial support from the NSW Environmental Education Trust.

Intended to empower people with a love of rivers and wetlands in the Murray Darling Basin, the handbook covers the types of wetlands found in the MDB, how they are watered and what has happened since the natural patterns of wetting and drying were disrupted.

The Indigenous values and uses of wetlands and wetland resources are covered in some detail. The comparison of different human behaviours introduces activities designed to raise awareness and help change attitudes.

Importantly, the concept of payment for ecosystem services or environmental stewardship is discussed. Wetlands provide us with many economically valuable services and it is hoped that conservation-minded landholders, local

governments and others will recognise the benefits and advocate for incentive-based approaches.

Acknowledging that readers are more likely to take action when the world around them reinforces what they have read, the handbook focuses on three wetlands in the Central West of NSW. It accepts that mistakes have been made but rather than dwelling on the negatives, it identifies some of the ways the local situation can be improved. It proposes a range of activities that individuals and groups can undertake to build understanding and raise awareness of the problems – and the need for change – in their local communities.

A summary brochure on restoring high conservation value wetlands is being prepared as part of this project. This will be used to promote the handbook, as well as a series of workshops that IRN is developing for later this year. Details about the workshops will be provided in a future edition of *IRN News*.

## Much has happened since the last *IRN Newsletter*

The new Murray Darling Authority assumed responsibility for the functions of the former Murray Darling Basin Commission from the start of 2009 under Senator Wong, the Minister for Climate Change and Water. Rob Freeman, Chief Executive Officer, is now heading into development of The Basin Plan, due to come into operation in 2011.

IRN was pleased to meet up in an early 'getting to know the issues' sessions on some of IRN's key concerns.

The new Board has been announced and we await with interest to learn who will be appointed to the promised Basin Community Committee body. To subscribe to their e-letter visit [www.mdba.gov.au](http://www.mdba.gov.au)

Meanwhile there have been various changes and re-allocations of responsibility at State level, the most recent following the QLD elections with the creation of a super Department of Environment and Resource Management that covers water, climate change, land and environmental services, under Minister Stephen Robertson.

Around the Basin, while there have been some good rains in parts of the north, southern states continue to endure the long dry.

The Australian Water Network (AWN) was launched in April by Maude Barlow, senior water advisor to the President of the UN General Assembly. The AWN links activists, academics and community groups who are working in their local communities and states on the water crisis facing this country. Visit <http://groups.google.com/group/australian-water-network>.

The Federal Government has been involved in a number of water licence buy-backs including through joint contributions to purchase some western NSW properties destined for addition to the National Parks estate – Toorale (on the Darling at the bottom end of the Warrego), Pillicawarrina (adjacent to the Macquarie Marshes Nature Reserve, a listed Ramsar site) and most recently Booligal Station (includes key sections of the Booligal wetlands).

## Water for the Future - 2009 Federal Budget Outcomes

Water Minister Penny Wong has announced a \$12.9 billion package that "aim to secure our water supplies, use water wisely, take action on climate change and support healthy rivers." See [www.environment.gov.au/minister/rss/climate-water.xml](http://www.environment.gov.au/minister/rss/climate-water.xml)

IRN has highlighted the need to buy back water as essential to restoring river system health, even while continuing to deplore past decisions that effectively give away our public water resource to private ownership.

And for IRN, the most significant event has been the loss of full time Network Coordinator Amy Hankinson. Lack of funds to date precludes IRN from recruiting a replacement.

## Farewell to Amy



Amy Hankinson, IRN's able Network Coordinator for the past three years, has moved on to a new role. IRN misses her, is sad to see her go, and wishes her well.

Amy's last task for IRN was representing the Network as a delegate to the tenth Ramsar Conference of Parties (CoP) held in Korea. She did an outstanding job in raising the plight of Australia's inland river systems, through negotiation, organisation with WWF of a side event, and intervention.

IRN welcomed the Australian Government's agreement to consider listing the Coorong and Lower Lakes on the Montreux Record, which means a national commitment to improving the condition of the site. However, we are disappointed that other key wetlands in the MDB, including the Red Gum forests along the River Murray, did not also get a mention.

During her final months with IRN, Amy completed a strong submission on flood plain harvesting, co-authored a report with ACF called *Wetlands for Our Future*, issued a short proposal for a national wetlands initiative entitled *Protecting Australia's Endangered Wetlands*, and represented IRN at two hearings of the Senate Inquiry into the Murray Darling Basin.

Amy also completed a grant-funded project on the biodiversity and values of the Darling Basin, and began a project on wetlands funded by the NSW Environmental Education Trust.

In a departing email she commented, "Hopefully someone will take my place with IRN, but it is currently unclear whether they will be in a slightly different or more limited capacity. However, IRN will certainly be going forward with its project on high value freshwater assets and hopefully its workshop on protecting environmental water."

Concluding with thanks for the help and cheer over the years, Amy added "I have thoroughly enjoyed myself and learnt more than I had ever imagined when I walked into the position and this water reform process three years ago."

### Help save precious resources Sign up for email newsletter

If you are happy to receive the *IRN Newsletter* via email, please let us know without delay at [coordinator@irnnsw.org.au](mailto:coordinator@irnnsw.org.au)

The Inland Rivers Network is keen to switch to sending our newsletter electronically to as many of our contacts as possible.

## The biodiversity and values of the Darling Basin

### A valuable and iconic asset

The enclosed brochure highlights key findings from a more detailed report compiled by Any Hankinson and Lindsay Soutar for IRN in 2008. The report proposes a series of management actions to increase and protect environmental water, identify and protect key high-value freshwater assets, increase re-snagging, control invasive species, and support and encourage landholder stewardship. This work was made possible by a grant from the Norman Wettenhall Foundation.

Water is critical to restoring health to our parched and dying rivers. Years of water deprivation – effectively man-induced drought through upstream extraction, diversion and regulation – culminating in prolonged drought have wreaked havoc on the extent and viability of many of our inland river systems.

IRN welcomes the actions of Minister Wong in upholding previously declared commitments under the National Water Initiative through water licence purchases at Toorale, at the bottom end of the Warrego system. Other notable and welcome water licence purchases include Pillacawarrina, adjacent to the Ramsar-listed Macquarie Marshes Nature Reserve; and most recently Booligal Station which includes key elements of the Booligal wetlands in the Lachlan catchment.

### A bit of good news...

Waters from the far corners of unregulated northern rivers are now entering Lake Eyre, following heavy summer monsoon rains.

Natural floods after long drought replenish and refresh these arid areas, kick starting another cycle of life as long dormant macrophytes, fish, waterbirds and other animals emerge, arrive, flourish and breed.

This is a time to celebrate life, and to ponder; as local beef producer David Brooks commented on the ABC's *7.30 Report*: "There's a great lesson out here. If people are happy to use what they've got, don't be too greedy. Leave a bit for the person downstream."

## Rural natural resources a big loser in Federal Budget

by Dr Judy Lambert, *Community Solutions*

Rural Australia's land, water and native vegetation are among the big losers in the Rudd Government's 12 May Budget.

Treasurer Swan and his colleagues could not find a mere \$13 million to enable Land & Water Australia (LWA) to continue.

For almost two decades LWA has brokered, managed and promoted national research into the sustainable use and management of land, water and native vegetation in rural Australia. The LWA is the only one of 15 Primary Industry Research & Development corporations established by the Hawke Government that focuses on the public good aspects of our rural landscapes (the other RDCs are all commodity focused). It has funded excellent research in riparian, groundwater, salinity, native vegetation and biodiversity, weeds, environmental water allocations and more recently climate change impacts on our rural landscapes.

That will all come to an end when LWA closes on 30 June 2009.

According to the Government, LWA's activities will be 'mainstreamed' into the relevant Government departments, but with Caring for Our Country (the Government's major environmental sustainability vehicle) heavily focused on 'on ground' work, it is hard to see where the research investment will come from.

At a time when our rural landscapes and waterways are under immense pressure from climate change, over-allocations of water, biodiversity loss and invasive species, the decision to end LWA funding seems short-sighted, leaving those of us involved in natural resource management bewildered. As one rural landholder said when he heard the news of LWA's planned closing, "It's crazy. We in rural Australia need all the help we can get from science".

Mistakes like this are not easily reversed but let's hope that, with community support, an Australian Greens proposal for a new and expanded Land, Water & Biodiversity Research Institute can be built from the wreckage of Land & Water Australia.

## Help keep IRN afloat

Since the Inland Rivers Network was established back in 1991 we have worked hard to share information and improve understanding of what is needed to maintain the health of our inland river systems. Over the years much has been achieved through workshops, conferences, submissions and communications such as our newsletter.

Recognising that the environment's voice must be heard as water reform discussions got underway, IRN received a series of modest State Government grants that allowed us to maintain a full-time coordinator position and a regular newsletter. However, in these harsh economic times, it has become clear that these funding sources can no longer be relied upon.

Therefore we are looking to you, a member of our long term network, to consider providing us with some financial support.

If IRN received \$100 a year from each name on our newsletter list, it would be possible to again employ a full-time coordinator and office base, refresh and improve our links and partnerships across the inland, maintain a regular newsletter, contribute constructively to the discussion on the new Murray Darling Basin Plan and more. Even just \$10 each would help. IRN is now depending on your support to continue and build on our work on floodplain harvesting, safeguarding environmental flows, and freshwater protected areas.

Cheques should be made out to: 'Water for the Rivers' Fund, and sent to IRN Ltd., Suite 504, 32 York St., Sydney 2000. Receipts can only be sent if a stamped self-addressed envelope is enclosed.

Please contact Anne Reeves (Hon. President) if you would like more information about how you can help us at this critical time.

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## Credits

The Inland Rivers Network (IRN) Inc. is a coalition of environment groups and individuals which was established in 1991 to promote the health of inland rivers, wetlands and groundwaters.

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