

Darling River flows save Murray Mouth – for now

by Dietrich Willing



Main photo: The Darling River at Bourke on 11th February 2010 after recent rains. Photo: Andreas Buisman/Julia King

Top corner photo: In contrast, a previous IRN News cover-photo from 2006 showing a very stressed Darling River. Photo: Amy Hankison

Heavy rains in Queensland and northern NSW in December and January have filled the Darling and rescued the mouth of the Murray from seawater inundation for two years.

Under pressure from the Commonwealth to act for the whole of the Murray Darling Basin, NSW negotiated with S.A. and Victoria to supply a minimum of 148 Gegalitres to S.A., thereby alleviating the necessity

to open the sea barrages on the Murray mouth.

Mr Rann, Premier of S.A. said, "The extra water will ensure that, even if record low flows continue throughout 2010, we will maintain water levels in the Lower Lakes above the critical levels necessary to avert further environmental damage." It will also delay the building of a weir at Pomanda Island, below Lock 1, needed to provide drinking water to

residents as acidification creeps up the river from the mouth.

The agreement, made in mid January will fill two of the four lakes in the Menindee Lakes System but does not take account of subsequent rains. Extra flows from heavy rain in late January should be prioritized for release to S.A. Ecologically, it is more important to provide water to the lower Murray than to fill a third lake.

See Management of Minindee Lakes releases to South Australia at http://www.water.nsw.gov.au/ArticleDocuments/34/menindee_mgt_of_menindee_lakes_releases_to_sa.pdf.aspx

Critical Water Planning – Murray Valley at http://www.water.nsw.gov.au/ArticleDocuments/34/crit_water_murray_20100115.pdf.aspx

See inside for more on the upcoming Wetlands Workshops and the Murray-Darling Basin Plan

Welcome to our first newsletter for 2010

Anne Reeves, IRN President

IRN, like many of the rivers of the Darling system refreshed after a long dry by the northern monsoonal rains, is enjoying a flush of new energy. A prime focus is The Basin Plan being developed under the Murray Darling Basin Authority.

The previously promised workshops on wetlands as key assets of high conservation value in the region will be rolled out through March, April and May – see details overleaf and in the enclosed brochure. Using a handbook

compiled by Sarah Moles, which drew on previous reports, this second phase is being coordinated by Bev Smiles, assisted by our new part time administration officer Emma Hollows.

IRN has also continued to participate and make representations on a range of water policy and management issues, including the recent consultation draft on Water Planning Guidelines under the National Water Initiative.

Please also help us keep in touch with

you by supplying details of any change of your contact details as we know quite a few have been affected by role and organisational changes while remaining actively involved in water matters. And remember to also alert us to issues of particular concern affecting inland river health.

Over the summer IRN moved to office space at 5, Wilson Street, Newtown - note the new contact details provided in this newsletter.

High Conservation Value Wetlands Workshops – Water for Wetlands is Water for Life

The Inland Rivers Network is running a series of workshops over the next few months on understanding the values of wetlands in the Murray Darling Basin. These workshops have been developed with financial support from the NSW Environmental Trust.

The aim of these workshops will be to encourage and empower communities with a love of rivers and wetlands to become involved in the protection of these high conservation value freshwater systems in their local areas.

Recognising the diverse range of ecological and social values of these natural rivers and wetlands in the Murray Darling Basin, these workshops will encourage and facilitate discussion across various groups with the goal of achieving

cooperative stewardship that can improve the health of these special places.

With a focus on information sharing from many different parts of the community, the workshops will combine the theory behind the importance of conserving natural river and wetland systems with practical steps that can lead towards achieving sustainable management of these freshwater areas.

The workshops will involve presentations from IRN, Murray-Darling Basin Authority, local Catchment Management Authorities and various local conservation groups, indigenous groups, landholders and other individuals.

Workshops will be held in the Central West, Namoi, Lachlan and Western

Catchment Management Authority areas between March and May. The first workshop will be held in the Central West at Coonamble.

A full itinerary of workshops including dates, locations and venues is provided in the enclosed brochure 'Water Wetlands Life'. This information is also available on the website www.irnsw.org.au or call the IRN office on (02) 8580 6609.

If you would like to take part in these workshops and get involved in conserving wetlands in your local area email admin@irnsw.org.au or fill out the form in the brochure and post to;

Wetland Workshops,
Inland Rivers Network,
PO BOX 1132, Newtown NSW 2042.

New Admin Officer at IRN



Recently joining the IRN team in the new Admin Officer role is Emma Hollows.

Emma has a background in environmental science, specialising in ecology, and political science and is currently completing her Masters degree in Environmental Science and Law.

Emma has a strong connection to the inland and remote areas of New South Wales and is enthusiastic about becoming involved with such important freshwater issues.

Emma will be part-time in the new IRN office and contactable via admin@irnsw.org.au or via phone (02) 8580 6609.

World Wetlands Day & Ramsar Secretary General visit

World Wetlands Day on the 2nd of February 2010 marked the anniversary of the signing of the Ramsar Convention in 1971, however there are still many wetland systems in poor health and lacking recognition.

In October 2009 the Ramsar Secretary General visited Australia. Some of the main areas of concern that were raised with the Ramsar Secretary General by environmental and wetland organisations were; the Traveston Crossing Dam, Coorong and the Lower Lakes and migratory bird habitat protection in Australia and the EAA Flyway.

From Cassie Price, Australian Wetland Alliance.

Murray-Darling Basin Planning Process

by Bev Smiles

The Water Act 2007 established the Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) with the purpose of developing a Basin Plan to be adopted by the Commonwealth Government.

The MDBA is working to a timetable that will produce a draft Basin Plan in June 2010 and a final Plan for implementation in 2011. This Plan is required to set enforceable limits on the quantities of surface water and groundwater that can be taken from the Basin water resources. The MDBA must establish, using the best available science, the level of water that can be taken without compromising the key environmental assets, key ecosystem functions and the key environmental health of the water source.

The MDBA released an issues paper on Sustainable Diversion Limits (SDLs) in November 2009. The need for SDLs has arisen because of the enormous stress caused by past over allocation of water access, prolonged drought and emerging climate change variability.

IRN developed a submission to the issues paper identifying some key areas for MDBA consideration in setting the SDLs. Of particular importance is the connectivity between surface water and groundwater systems.

IRN strongly disagrees with the suggested general approach to set separate SDLs for surface water and groundwater. This approach will not lead to an improvement in sustainable water management in the MDB.

Improved monitoring and adequate resources into gaining more knowledge about the connectivity between groundwater and surface water systems will enable joint SDLs to be developed.

It was also highlighted that interception of surface water and groundwater sources by the rapidly expanding mining industry in the MDB needs to be taken into account.

The Water Act 2007 has a core objective to 'give effect to relevant international agreements' through the development of a Basin Plan.

Adequate volumes of water need to be returned to the wetlands, floodplains and river systems in the MDB to achieve this core objective.

Joint environment group statement on national water reform

IRN has joined key State and national environment groups in signing the following statement. It urges the Council of Australian Governments to improve water management for environmental outcomes.

The pace of water reform has slowed

We call on the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) to rapidly accelerate the delivery of existing national water reform commitments and end dangerous levels of water extractions from river and groundwater systems.

Aquatic ecosystems are a life-support system sustaining millions of Australians. COAG's failure to meet its national water reform commitments is contributing to the destruction of aquatic ecosystems, and threatening our well-being and prosperity. COAG must also address the rapidly growing threats to water quality, ecosystem health and water supplies from mining and infrastructure construction, particularly in NSW and Queensland.

The National Water Commission (NWC) has prepared 68 recommendations aimed at improving the implementation of national water reform. The NWC has asked state and federal governments focus on six key recommendations at the COAG meeting in Brisbane on 7 December 2009.

Renewed action to implement National Water Reform

We call on COAG to take action to address the following key findings and recommendations from the NWC at their 7 December meeting:

- 1 Overallocation is still not dealt with – 15 years after state governments first promised to fix it (NWC, 2009). Address the overuse of water from rivers and aquifers by accelerating the recovery of water for the environment.
- 2 Forty per cent of promised water plans are still outstanding, and many others are suspended – caught short by climate change (NWC, 2009). All rivers and aquifers must be covered by water plans that deliver credible environmental outcomes based on good science and remain viable and meaningful under climate change and severe drought scenarios.
- 3 The NWC calls for the coordinated removal of all barriers to water trade, including the 4% rule (NWC, 2009). Remove volumetric constraints on

water trading and enable water to be reallocated to the environment as effectively and efficiently as possible.

- 4 Environmental water lacks security, especially in drought (NWC, 2009). Provide optimal and legally protected environmental flows to all rivers and wetlands and ensure they are managed by well resourced environmental managers with a clear and accountable mandate to protect river health.
- 5 The pace of water reform has slowed, at just the time when climate change has raised the bar (NWC, 2009). Take action to ensure that the environment does not bear a disproportionate share of water reduction caused by climate change.
- 6 The Commission recommends a national strategy to foster the development of water sensitive cities (NWC, 2009). Urgently diversify urban water supplies by implementing demand management strategies and sustainable supply options including rainwater tanks, recycling and stormwater harvesting.

Heritage places Most at Risk - Murray Darling Basin listed

In October 2009 the National Trust released a list of the National Top 10 Heritage Places Most at Risk for the year. Included in this list is the Lower Lakes and Coorong in South Australia and the entire region of the Murray Darling Basin. These places are listed due to the imminent risk of destruction and continuing deterioration of their high heritage, cultural and ecological values.

For the Lower Lakes and Coorong, the National Trust outlines failing regulatory structures, unsustainable

water extraction and drought as cause for the lack of flows and high salt levels which are a threat to this internationally significant wetland. The National Trust also stated that the current and proposed actions by the South Australian Government will not adequately deal with the lack of environmental flows in this system.

The Murray Darling Basin is included in the Top 10 places due to the drastic reduction, and in some places cessation, of water flows in both river systems and

the degradation of over 95% of the Murray due to historical and continuing over-allocation of water.

The National Trust calls for a cooperative effort by Government, business and community to increase water flows and restore flow patterns in order to conserve these suffering freshwater systems.

For more information on the Our Heritage at Risk program see www.heritageatrisk.org.au

About the Inland Rivers Network

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



Your support for the work of the Inland Rivers Network is important.

If you support the production of the IRN News and would like to see the newsletter and the work that IRN does continued into the future, you are invited to send a donation.

Inland Rivers Network has moved...

Our new contact details are;

Inland Rivers Network

PO Box 1132, Level 2, 5 Wilson St
Newtown NSW 2042

email: admin@irnsw.org.au
ph: (02) 8580 6609
fax: (02) 9290 2525
www.irnsw.org.au

IRN News via email – sign up now

Thank you to those readers who contacted us about wanting to receive the email version of the IRN Newsletter.

In order to save precious resources the Inland Rivers Network is keen to switch to sending our newsletter electronically to as many contacts as possible.

If you are happy to receive IRN News via email, please let us know without delay by contacting admin@irnsw.org.au

IRN NEWS is also available at our website www.irnsw.org.au

**Surface
Mail**

**Postage
Paid
Australia**

Printed on recycled paper and with vegetable ink.

Printed by www.breakout.net.au

Inland Rivers Network

PO Box 1132, Level 2, 5 Wilson St, Newtown NSW 2042

email: admin@irnsw.org.au ph: (02) 8580 6609 fax: (02) 9290 2525 www.irnsw.org.au

