

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Australia

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| Secretary: | Sc |

Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for giving the public the opportunity to comment on 'the Impact of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan in Regional Australia'.

I have already submitted my thoughts on the 'Guide to the proposed Basin Plan' to the Murray-Darling Basin Authority and now submit my thoughts on your inquiry.

"So now they had two harvests a year instead of one. More rice for the price of a river."

In a chapter entitled "God's Own Country" in "The God of Small Things" Arundhati Roy was talking about India. But her wonderful two line summation equally applies to the Murray-Darling today where quite simply, starkly and tragically the Murray River, our most iconic river is dying .Dying due to today's overallocation of water-2000 GL/year in 1920 to entitlements of approximately 11,000 GL/y in the 1990s.

The situation has been exacerbated by the last decade's protracted drought. And with global efforts to seriously address the climate crisis painfully slow so far, rainfall in the catchments will be lower, temperatures will be higher and evaporation rates will be higher, so there will be a greater demand for more irrigation water.

Thankfully both the Opposition Leader and the Government agree that the present overallocation of water is the cause of the present, tragic state of the Murray.

Australia is legally-bound under international law to ensure that there is an adequate allocation of water to ensure the ecological integrity of the Murray. I think this is the point that Michael Taylor AO Chair of the Murray Darling Authority has been making both in the many incredibly tough community meetings he has chaired to explain the Guide before and after his recent resignation from the Authority. Australia is duty-bound to ensure that the Murray River does not die.

Realistically because of the slow pace to address climate change, the world's children will lose the Great Barrier Reef which is Australia's greatest tourist drawcard. Tourism is one of our greatest employers, particularly with labour-intensive, lesser skilled employment. There is great employment and recreational potential along the 2500 kilometre length of a living Murray River.

The problem I see with the Inquiry's Terms of Reference is that if under our watch we allow the Murray River to continue to die, the socio-economic results will be catastrophic.

This is where education of the entire community is so vital for as the Prime Minister continues to stress and as Baba Dioum, a poet from Senegal has said:"We will understand what we are taught." With education comes greater understanding which gives one the opportunity to make better choices, to take better decisions.

In the community there still appears to be widespread lack either of understanding or acceptance that a truly viable economy is based on environmental integrity; not the other way round.

The Hon Kelvin Thomson MP puts it this way:"The economy is a wholly-owned subsidiary of the environment."(House of Reps. 10.2.10.) Michael Cathcart talking about the Murray-Darling Basin on Bush Telegraph puts it this way:"We live in an environment, not in an economy."

We are constantly told that we must have a strong economy. Then funds can be trickled down to provide for social cohesion and ecological integrity. But this method is not working,it is failing too many people and too many species, species on which we depend .

To achieve this paradigm shift, which will enable us to transition to ensure the Murray-Darling Basin becomes environmentally, socially and economically viable ,basic educational fundamentals will have to be taught and understood by the whole community and I think understanding of the following basics are vital if we are to effectively transition to a sustainable future.

Our four basic, vital needs are:- clean, carbon-constrained air, unpolluted water, uncontaminated soil and species diversity. In Aussie sporting vernacular, clean air, water and soil are our legal "performance enhancing substances."

So, to what extent are we prepared to change our WANTS to preserve our NEEDS?

Barry Commoner's "Laws of Ecology" must be understood and embraced:

Everything is connected to everything else.

Everything must go somewhere (thus affecting air, water, soil and species diversity.)

There's no such thing as a free lunch.

Nature knows best.

The understanding that: We all live downstream ,both in physical terms like those people living in communities downstream of all other communities living upstream along the Murray River. But it should also be remembered that "We all live downstream " in temporal terms both from generations who lived in earlier times as well as every future generation yet to be born.

The future is what we choose and the choices we make can have beneficial effects on the choices our children and grandchildren will make or adverse effects on their future.

I note with considerable surprise that your committee comprises of seven male politicians and only one female politician ,Ms Kirsten Livermore MP who had four other female companions who were members of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Climate Change, Water, Environment and the Arts whose twelve members produced "Managing our coastal zone in a changing climate." I would prefer your committee had a fairer gender balance.

Under the Proposed Basin Plan less water will be available for agriculture. It will therefore be very questionable to continue to grow rice, a very water-intensive crop, in the Basin.

Crop shifts will be also required due to climate change with higher temperatures and the resultant higher evaporation rates. I believe photosynthesis declines with higher temperatures which leads to lower crop yields.

Our major political Parties still appear to have no understanding whatever that it is essential that they lead by example with very simple water saving measures that could be used on a daily basis, Australia-wide and are measures that don't cost the Earth to implement.

Many voters such as me have corresponded with politicians and government agencies for decades. But The Greens are the only political Party in Australia that sends double-side printed replies to voters.

So to use less water involved in the manufacture of writing paper, all our major political Parties should set their printers and photo-copier defaults so that they have to choose NOT to print double-sided.

Community members like me can do the same or write on scrap paper that has already been used on one side.

The Guide to the proposed Basin Plan is designed to convince community members for the need to use less water. The Guide is a very thoughtful and impressive document, written on 260 high quality pages. It would be useful if as many people as possible at least had a quick look of the document.

So to conserve water by maximising the distribution of each copy , why isn't there a single sentence along the following lines on the front cover of the Guide?

"When you have finished with this copy of the Guide please pass on this copy to a colleague, friend or relative or return it to (your name) so it can be REUSED."

so what about
A water saving measure that I believe would also be worth exploring for its local employment potential, reduction in water evaporation, reduction in cost for the treatment and transportation of non-potable water, collection of rainwater exactly where it falls, provides a limited degree of flood mitigation and which would cut the loss of our extremely scarce resource, namely arable land.

So how much does it cost the taxpayers for a major dam including the cost of submerged arable land as well as the distribution and treatment of its water?

For the same amounts of taxpayers' funds how many rainwater tanks could be manufactured and installed on homes, schools, hospitals, food processing plants, sheds, silos and shopping centres?

I, like The Hon Kevin Rudd MP and some other politicians, do not see a great deal point in continuing to fund the war in Afghanistan. I do not believe the above measure to generate genuine employment by greatly increasing the manufacture and installation of rainwater tanks in many of our cities and towns would be a waste of taxpayers' funds.

Another very simple measure that would ensure we use less water with greater water efficiency that will be essential if we intend to be permanent residents on Earth is to once again use durable materials for durable, reusable products.

Today in Australia there is still widespread lack of understanding or acceptance of the manufacturing inputs of every product we choose to manufacture and use, whether it be a single-use plastic bag (made from oil) or a Tupperware lunchbox that is washed and reused again and again for many years.

The manufacturing inputs are materials, water, energy, air and water pollution and landfill waste. These inputs are incurred every time a single-use disposable is made. But they are locked in the product for the life of every product that is reused again and again.

How much do we value our children and grandchildren? It can be seen on a daily basis that climate change is starting to cause us adults today a degree of inconvenience.

Today carbon dioxide levels are higher than they have ever been for the past 800,000 years. Unless we now start to adequately address climate change it will be far more than a mere inconvenience to our children and grandchildren as the planet really starts to heat up.

And the return to using durable materials like glass, metals and most plastics for products that are durable, reusable and reliable in preference to disposables is one of the simplest ways for each person in Australia to reduce water consumption as well as cutting their carbon footprint and all other manufacturing inputs.

In Australia today we still appear hell-bent on mimicking the United States where of the materials flow only 1% ends up in use 6 months later.

When you consider that :"The product itself contains on average only 5% of the raw materials involved in the process of making and delivering it."(William Mc Donough and Michael Braungart 'Cradle to Cradle') in our finite world it might be worthwhile reverting to the war-effort, pre-television, pre-consumer era rather than continuing to live as if there's no tomorrow.

Our children and grandchildren will appreciate this change in thinking and behaviour.

And if you could change the present thinking of the Queensland government with their proposed fossil fuel growth of 80% that really would be helpful.

Can we learn something from the aboriginal nations who until the last 200 years lived in harmony with this fragile land for 40,000 years? One of their common beliefs is that the rivers and creeks in this country transport the living blood around the country to keep Australia alive as a living organism. But once we slow this vital blood flow with too many dams or take too much blood from the rivers, the rivers and then the country dies.

Finally, who might like to live beside the mighty Murray? My partner and I planned to build and live in retirement beside the Murray. I lived near the River Thames in the U.K. before I migrated in 1964 when I first saw the Murray.

Now I'm retired, three years ago we camped beside the Murray, the Murrumbidgee and the Edward River in the red gum forests to find a place where we would like to live out the rest of our lives.

But the shock of my first sight of the once mighty Murray since the 1960s still stays with me today. The redgums were dying. There were no young gum trees whatever, no regrowth. No riverbank vegetation whatever, the riverbanks jigsaw puzzled with huge dusty cracks. The Murray River was dying through its lack of lifegiving water.

We are now building our retirement home in a quiet coastal community away from Queensland and away from the Murray where our retirement dreams once were.

I wish you well with your important deliberations which I only hope are based on the understanding that we cannot have a truly viable economy and social cohesion in the Murray-Darling Basin unless we have environmental integrity. This flows from an adequate water flow in the Murray River.

Happy Christmas and all the best in the future you choose for your family, your staff and their children.

Yours sincerely,

HARRY JOHNSON
Volunteer, Kingfisher Recycling Centre, Aspley Special School.
(brochure enclosed.)