

Ebbs and flows

Fighting for the Murray

What does the future hold for one of Australia's greatest rivers, and the people and industries depending on it? Peter Cotton speaks to members of the House of Representatives who live along the banks of the mighty Murray, and finds out how the location of their electorates helps to shape their views.



Murray River panorama from Murtho Lookout, above Renmark (SA). Photo: John Baker

Ask a politician about problems besetting the Murray-Darling River system and their response will likely depend on how close their electorate is to the mouth of the Murray.

This greatest of Australian rivers meets the Southern Ocean near the Younghusband Peninsula in South Australia, and members of parliament representing South Australian electorates tend to be gloomy in their assessment of the river's health.

And no wonder. During the summer months, up to 80 per cent of Adelaide's drinking water is drawn from the Murray, and the

Murray-Darling Basin Commission says that within 50 to 100 years the river water will be so saline half the time that it will exceed Australian guidelines for good drinking water.

Meanwhile, members in New South Wales and Queensland whose seats take in the upper reaches of the Darling and Snowy Rivers deny the Murray is in trouble. They characterise such talk as irresponsible scaremongering.

The Murray-Darling's sources are the Australian Alps and the upper reaches of the Murrumbidgee and Darling Rivers.

The system stretches across the Australian Capital Territory and four states: South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland.

Patrick Secker's South Australian electorate of Barker takes in the mouth of the Murray and he fears for the future of the river: "The worst case scenario," he says, "is that we have a river system that becomes too salty and dies on us. We see the worst of it in my electorate because we're at the end of the line."

The body of water that makes it to the mouth of the Murray has been depleted by thousands of farmers drawing water for pasture and crops up river.

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In the Mallee areas of Victoria and South Australia, the clearing of deep rooted native vegetation for arable farming has resulted in rising watertables and land salinisation. This photograph shows water at the surface, waterlogging and extensive salt-encrusted areas without any vegetative cover. Photo: David Eastburn/Murray-Darling Basin Commission



An aerial photograph of the River Murray mouth in South Australia, June 2002. Photo: South Australian government

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The activities of these irrigators mean that not enough fresh water makes it down the river system to dilute the salty water that seeps into the Murray from aquifers deep below Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia. In some places this seeping water is saltier than the sea.

The statistics on salt in the Murray-Darling Basin are mind boggling. It's thought that almost 300 semi-trailer loads of salt flow past the South Australian river town of Morgan every day.

Overall, it's estimated there are 100 billion tonnes of salt in the river system. One source of it is the water that flows into the river from underground aquifers deep below the Basin.

"Inland Australia was once an inland sea which contained salt," says Neil Andrew, Speaker of the House of Representatives and Member for the South Australian seat of Wakefield. "Salty water from that ancient sea bed makes its way underground to the lowest point it can, and that's the Murray-Darling Basin."

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the federal and state governments spent millions of dollars on schemes to intercept salt water where it entered the river.

One of these schemes saw the installation of ground water pumps to intercept saline water near the South Australian river towns of Woolpunda and Waikerie.

This salinated water is pumped into an evaporation basin at nearby Stockyard Plains.

In the 1980s, between 300 and 350 tonnes of salt entered the Murray River each day around Woolpunda and Waikerie. The towns' salt interception scheme has reduced that to less than 20 tonnes a day.

But while up-river irrigation can hurt communities down river, the dairy herds and cotton, rice and horticultural crops that farmers produce using river water help underpin Australia's economic prosperity.

The Murray-Darling Basin has been dubbed Australia's food bowl. It contains 52,000 farms—that's 43 per cent of the farms in Australia—and 34 per cent of the wheat grown in Australia comes from the Basin.

It also contains 72 per cent of Australia's irrigated farms with production valued at between \$3-\$4 billion a year.

Tourism in the Basin is worth another \$3.4 billion annually.

The Member for the Queensland seat of Maranoa, Bruce Scott, rejects the notion that irrigators from his state are responsible for salinity problems in the lower Murray. "Queensland doesn't deliver salt into the river system," he says. "And we will not be branded as rednecks and irresponsible when the development in Queensland is not contributing to salt in the system."

Queensland may not be responsible for a lot of salt, but the waters that flow south out of the state are a key to managing salinity in the waters of the Murray.

According to the Member for the Victorian seat of Mallee, John Forrest, prior to the European settlement of Australia, the Murray-Darling was a system that took salt off the land and transferred it to the sea.

"It's why the sea is salty," says Mr Forrest. "What Europeans have done is try to turn the river system into a fresh water carrier and so we no longer have a process for delivering salt to the sea. Now we must either accumulate that salt on the land, or find another mechanism to get it to the sea."

The parliamentarians whose electorates fall within the river system are members of either the Liberal Party or the National Party.

They're government members, but they express widely divergent views on the health of the Murray, reflecting the interests of the electorates they represent.

The odd man out in this story is the Australian Labor Party's Shadow Minister for the Environment, the Member for Wills (Vic), Kelvin Thomson.

Mr Thomson says the Murray-Darling Basin is in crisis and the present management of the river system is unsustainable. "If action is not taken," he says, "Adelaide water and the water in some inland towns in New South Wales will become undrinkable within the next couple of decades.

"There'll be a massive adverse impact on our agriculture because the Basin is the principal source of Australian agricultural produce and salinity will render much of the Basin unusable. We also need flows of water that approximate the natural flood cycle because of their importance to the river red gum population and the native fish in the Basin.

"There's no pain free option when it comes to correcting the problems of the river system," says Mr Thomson. "There's pain for those people who must have their water allocation cut, but that must be balanced against the pain to the people of Adelaide and the pain to the nation's economy if the Murray-Darling system is trashed."

Mrs Sussan Ley's New South Wales seat of Farrer takes in the junction of the Murray and the Darling Rivers.

She denies that the Murray is in crisis and says recent dry times are largely responsible for water quality problems in the river.

"That's just nature and we're all feeling the pain of it," she says. "But Australia is a land where low rainfall is a fact of life."

"I'm all in favour of South Australia having decent water but I don't know that the problem can be laid at the feet of New South Wales irrigators. Under the cap introduced in 1995, no additional water can be taken from the Murray, but Queenslanders have basically ignored the cap, hence there's no water coming down the Darling, hence the poor water quality in South Australia."

As for the release of so-called environmental flows of water from the Snowy River scheme



Fruit stall near Monash in the SA Riverland. Photo: John Baker



River scene in the Gunbower State Forest, on Gunbower Island, near Cohuna (Vic). Photo: John Baker

to help preserve habitat down river, Mrs Ley says she's opposed: "Any change that takes water from the scheme that was set up to drought-proof the west of New South Wales and put it back into the river for environmental purposes is in my view not right," she says. "Some of my colleagues might argue with me on this but I'm here to argue for my electorate."

While the amount of water that farm irrigators can draw from the river system is now mostly capped, there is a general recognition that the water licences issued to irrigators over the decades means an unsustainable amount of water is drawn from the system. It's been over-subscribed.

Dr Sharman Stone is Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for the Environment and Heritage, and Member for the Victorian seat of Murray.

She says irrigators will have to return gigalitres of water to the system because of the over-allocation of water licences, especially in New South Wales.

"That means very significant levels of compensation for people who were given legal access to that water," she says. "If you take something like that away, the government is required to compensate."

Dr Stone says the problem with the Murray-Darling river system goes well beyond the salinity of the Murray.

"The problems with the Murray go back 120 years when paddle steamers cut timber along the shores of the river to fire up their on-board furnaces," she says.

"Today, it's house boats, speed boats and jet skis that erode the banks of the river and leave an oil scum on the surface of the water. If you take a bucket of water from the river it stinks of sewerage. It's a multifaceted issue and we're going to have to tackle it on many fronts."

Dr Stone says we're only now learning how to manage the salt in the Murray-Darling river system. "The river continues to deteriorate because we harvest too much water from the upper reaches of the system," she says. "Those areas in the north are going through the same developmental stages in agribusiness that Victoria went through in

the 1880s and up to the 1950s. They must learn from our mistakes."

Dr Stone says the problems being experienced by the Murray are another indication of Australians failing to appreciate the nature of the continent on which they live.

"We've got to educate people that the oldest, driest continent on earth cannot continue to have the highest per capital consumption of water of any country and the highest per capita water stored," she says. "Less than one per cent of the water used in Melbourne is recycled. We need a whole rethink about how we use water."

Bruce Scott agrees: "We've got to have a national debate on water usage," he says. "How we use it on urban gardens, on our golf courses and sports grounds. For too long it's been too easy to point the finger at the farmer as being the villain."

While John Forrest denies the Murray-Darling is in crisis, he questions the way some agriculturalists use river water: "In New South Wales they're growing rice with the water from the Murray," he says. "Growing rice in that kind of environment is a formula for disaster.

"However, the political challenges of doing something about it (rice growing) are immense, almost impossible, because there's so much infrastructure and employment associated with the rice industry in places like Deniliquin and Jerilderie. I guess we just have to plod on."

Any questioning of the viability of rice farming on the Murray prompts a stinging response from Sussan Ley: "It's a pity that the critics of the management of the Murray, most of whom live on the coast, don't travel out and acquaint themselves with the work of a rice farmer," she says. "They'll say that they don't buy Australian rice because it's sucking precious water out of the river system. That's just not the case. It takes the



Wentworth (NSW) is located at the junction of the Darling and Murray Rivers. Photo: David Eastburn/Murray-Darling Basin Commission

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same amount of water to grow a paddock of rice as it takes to grow a paddock of lucerne.”

The other source of salt in Murray River water is dry land salinity. The removal of native vegetation for grain crops means that when crops are not in the ground, rainwater goes deep into the soil and becomes saline.

“That water might move through the soil at 150 centimetres a year and take 80 to 100 years to become a problem in any of the creeks that flow into the Murray,” says Neil Andrew. “But once it gets there, it adds to the salinity of the water in the catchment.”

Mr Andrew says farmers in the Basin are now planting salt bush in areas they crop in an effort to staunch some of the saline inflow.

Also, the CSIRO is developing crops that can be planted twice a year. “It means they can pick up most of the rain that falls in a cropping area,” says Mr Andrew.

“As far as irrigation is concerned, the growing use of drippers and micro jet sprinklers means water can be applied more efficiently in irrigation areas. In some cases they’re hooked up to computers which monitor the soil profile at root level and initiate watering when necessary.

“The Murray is not a case of ruination if we do some bold things, like acquire some of the water now used on irrigation and spend money correcting the mistakes we’ve made.”

John Cobb, the Member for the New South Wales seat of Parkes, opposes taking water from irrigators in an attempt to solve salinity problems in the Murray River.

Mr Cobb, whose electorate takes in a big portion of the Darling River, sees the construction of more dams on the river system as a part solution to the salinity problem.

“Then when we have floods, we’d store more water,” he says. “Even with this greater storage, the floods would produce more water than we could handle and so there would still be a flushing out of the system.”

Clearly, the range of measures being put forward to solve the problems of the Murray-Darling will take time to implement, and a lot of money.

The federal government has already allocated \$1.4 billion to its action plan for the Basin, but John Forrest says it’ll take a lot more: “It’ll probably need something like \$30 billion over the next ten years or so,” he says. “We’ll get there. I’m just frustrated that it takes so long.”

Mr Forrest is not the only one frustrated with progress in addressing problems in the Murray-Darling Basin. Things are happening, but slowly.

The Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council consists of ministers from New South Wales, South Australia, Victoria,

Queensland, the ACT and the Commonwealth, all of whom are responsible for land, water and the environment in their jurisdictions.

The council has the power to make decisions for the Basin as a whole and in July it established community-wide consultations on the issue of environmental flows of water for the Murray and initiated a study on the issue.

Neil Andrew was an irrigator orchardist on the Murray for almost 40 years until he was elected to parliament in 1983. He says the Murray’s problems are not a cause for despair.

“We are taking action and there are some good signs,” he says. “At Morgan, a town at the bend in the Murray in South Australia, salinity has fallen every year of the past five. It’s too early to celebrate any sort of win but some of the things we’re doing are working.”

Asked if he thinks irrigators pay too little for the water they draw from the river system, Mr Andrew says he prefers to talk about a realistic charging regime. “Water has to be priced at a level so that it’s recognised as an asset that flows to the most productive crops,” he says. Questioned further, Mr Andrew says: “It’s inevitable that water charges will go up.” ■

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The Living Murray – the community engagement process

The Murray-Darling Basin enriches Australia by an estimated \$23 billion every year, but the wider value of the Basin to the national economy is much greater in terms of jobs and flow-on benefits—around \$75 billion each year.

The River Murray’s wealth is a primary driver of the economy. It cradles a sixth of the Australian landscape and its history and culture are part of our identity as a people.

Tens of millions enjoy its excellent food and farm products, its minerals and manufactured goods. It harbours a priceless resource in its internationally significant wetlands, from which birds migrate to distant reaches of the globe.

However, there is evidence the River Murray is in trouble. Poor water quality, loss of native plants, animals, fish, forests and wetlands, and an increase in pests such as carp, all point to a river and a landscape in decline. Scientific advice indicates that if we do nothing, the river’s health will inevitably get worse.

This will effect our irrigation and other industries, our native plants and animals, and our communities.

That is why the Murray-Darling Basin Commission has been directed by the Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council to carry

out a lengthy community engagement process to determine what people believe constitutes a healthy working river and what is needed to achieve it.

Launched in mid July, the three stages of the community engagement process will continue until the October 2003 Ministerial Council meeting.

Compared with the state of many of the world’s great rivers, we still have the opportunity to restore its health and vitality. Environmental flows are one way we can do this.

An ‘environmental flow’ is any river flow pattern provided with the intention of maintaining or improving river health and they include:

- making best use of water currently available to the environment;
- saving water lost in channels and other distribution systems and redirecting it to the environment; and
- reducing the amount of water removed from the river for human use.

Further information on this important community engagement process is available at www.thelivingmurray.mdbc.gov.au or by calling 1800 687 044. ■