

Water politics – the friction of fact versus fiction

Water management in the Murray-Darling Basin is of vital interest to the wine industry with much of Australia's winegrapes grown across this vast area. **Darren De Bortoli**, managing director of De Bortoli Wines, shares his views on the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, with a focus on South Australia's Lower Lakes.



Darren De Bortoli

The hysteria from the Millennium drought created some very perverse outcomes in a land of drought and flooding rains. Without doubt the lead up to the Millennium drought was mismanaged, particularly during the severe drought of 2002 and 2006 when little rain and snow fell in the most reliable catchment area of the Murray-Darling Basin.

I have always found that the use of averages has always been a source of great frustration. For example, the median inflows into the Murray-Darling Basin are around 24,000 gigalitres and the average inflows are 32,000 gigalitres, with great extremes shown by the 2006 drought of only 6000 gigalitres, and the 1956 floods of 117,000 gigalitres. Now to put that in perspective, the 2006 drought would have seen every river and creek dry within the Murray-Darling basin during the hot and dry summer months going into autumn, whereas the 1956 floods exceeded the total storages of 22,000 gigalitres several fold. The mismanagement leading up to the Millennium drought is shown by the misallocation of irrigation water with farm allocations of up to 120% of entitlements in the late 1990s. The simple allocation of the additional 20% to the environment at the time would have negated most of the poor outcomes on the river gum forests when the drought finally did hit with a vengeance as River gums, as a generalisation, are not flood dependent but flood tolerant.

The spectre of the Murray Mouth closing over combined with the South Australian Lower Lakes becoming dry (hence exposing the acid sulphate soils to air which are a common feature within estuaries and mangrove swamps, but are normally kept inert by tidal movement of sea water) became the final straw, and this is when the hysteria took on a life of its own. This fuelled the fires of discontent without once asking the most fundamental question and this is: what are the 7.6 kilometres of barrages that separate the Lower Lakes from the Coorong and Murray Mouth doing?

The Myth of the Lower Lakes and Coorong

The foundation of the unfolding fiasco was the 1985 Ramsar Convention listing by the South Australian Government of the Lower Lakes as an elevated fresh water system and the Coorong as a reverse estuary (i.e. its fresh water coming from the Murray-Darling Basin via the now artificially elevated fresh water Lake Alexandrina). The subsequent 2007 Water Act locked these artificial systems in place through compliance with these International agreements; this is when the situation now goes down the proverbial Alice in Wonderland rabbit hole. The Coorong fresh water flows rarely came from the Murray River. This is shown by the lack of Murray River diatoms

within the Coorong which was the first thing Professor Peter Gell noticed when he was looking at Coorong core samples, which also showed that the salinity levels were never greater than ocean water.

The fresh water for the Coorong came from what is referred to as the South East unconfined aquifer. The Coorong flows into Lake Alexandrina were the opposite of what is stated under the Ramsar convention character description, as were the ground and surface flows around the Lower Lakes. It is the lack of defined waterways below the Lower Lakes in the South East that should have made it obvious as to what was happening.

Marie Creek only drained three miles of land around Kingston when the South Australian Surveyor-General George Goyder recommended extending the Creek to stop flooding around Kingston. By the 20th Century substantial drainage work had already been undertaken. This started in the 1860s near Millicent and by the 1880s the construction of the Kingston-Bowaka drain was intercepting the southerly flows of the most westerly wetland that adjoined the coast line. In 1964 the well-

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