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Submission on the Impact of Murray – Darling Basin Plan in Regional Australia

To:-

The House of Representatives Standing Committee
on Regional Australia
P.O. Box 6021
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Canberra ACT 2600

From:-

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We acknowledge the Indigenous Nations of the Murray – Darling Basin as the Indigenous owners of the Basin 's lands and waters and thank them for the contribution they have made and continue to make to the Basin's Plan and to the wider community's understanding of the crucial importance of the restoration of the ecological health to the rivers, forests and wetlands of the Basin.

Introduction

“Many people believe that humans exist apart from other organisms. A different view of nature is needed: one which acknowledges that humans are part of ecological processes and that there are limits to the changes natural systems can tolerate. The book's editors say this process of education is the responsibility of everyone with a basic understanding of ecology.” (“What must change?” ECOS 78, Summer 1993/94).

It is very clearly evident from the Murray – Darling Basin Commission's Reports, the 1992 CSRIO Division of Water Resources, Towards Healthier Rivers Report, the State of the Environment Reports as well as the Australian Terrestrial Biodiversity Assessment 2002 Report, that the Basin's ecosystems are in a state of serious unprecedented biodiversity crisis.

As this crisis stems from our anthropocentric economy dominated decision processes which completely disregard the reality of constraints dictated by the ecology of the region,

including the finiteness of its carrying capacity, any attempts at averting the crisis will not be successful unless ecology and conservation of the region's biodiversity are given priority over all other considerations (1).

But to do this, we need to recognize and acknowledge the delusive basis of our cultural maladaptation and accept the reality of the finite world we live in, of our place in nature and of our ultimate dependence on the natural ecosystem services it provides us with, services that are so very essential for our very existence (2).

And of course, as pointed out by Stephen Boyden in his Ockham's Razor talk, "The Biology of Civilization", on the 12th December 2004, the backlash against such cultural reforms "usually comes from representatives of vested interests who are afraid that proposed corrective measures would be to their financial disadvantage. They argue that the problem does not exist, or has been grossly exaggerated, and they call the reformers alarmists, fanatics, scaremongers, prophets of doom and so on."

In this respect, the knowledge that the Indigenous Peoples provide us with especially about the amount our baselines have shifted (3), are of great value in comprehending the damage we have so far caused to our ecosystems and consequently in compelling us to take the correct steps to restore the ecological health of the river system.

And, as pointed out in the CSIRO's Report-

"Rivers must be allowed, where practical, to flow naturally. No other feature of river systems is as important in maintaining ecosystem diversity as the timing and extent of floods. Floods move sediment and nutrients into long-term stores, disperse the next generation of animals living in billabongs and wetlands. They are only a problem when people build on flood plains. Extensive community consultation is needed to bring about changes to land use zoning and building approvals in these area."

Such ecological flows as described by CSIRO are identical to what the Indigenous Peoples refer to as "Cultural flows". They differ from environmental flows in that "they are not constrained by the natural resource management framework that prioritizes economic values, perceives ecology and economy as oppositional goals, presumes that humans are the only ones who have agency to intervene and direct river flows" (see Weir cited in (1), p 126).

The direct and indirect impact of the Proposed Basin Plan on regional communities

“There is no escape from our interdependence with nature; we are woven into the closest relationship with the Earth, the sea, the air, the seasons, the animals and all the fruit of the Earth. What affects one affects all – we are part of greater whole – the body of the planet. We must respect, preserve, and love its manifold expression if we hope to survive”- Bernard Campbell anthropologist.

The greatest direct impact of the proposed Basin Plan will be on the Indigenous Nations, whose culture and cultural economy which are interdependent on the cultural flows of the rivers (see Weir cited in (1)) have been up to now adversely affected by our misguided use and ecologically unsubstantiated policy of over allocation of the rivers’ water for economic purposes, a policy that which has been also responsible for the current ecological crisis.

As we all are part of the natural environment and fully dependent on its ecological services for our wellbeing, the gain Indigenous Peoples are likely to receive from the propose Basin Plan giving environment a priority over other considerations, will also be a gain to the whole of Australia. For if the rivers continue to be deprived of their ecological flows, and in the interim of their environmental flows, the rivers, wetlands and forests will die and with it, all of the life in the Basin as well as its economy will die with it.

The governments and industry had no qualms in dismissing people from employment for economic reasons. We cannot see why the same should not hold for ecological reasons as well, especially as the ecological consequences of environmental degradation are far more serious, especially in the long term, than economic loses as they affect the livability and sustainability of the whole of Australia.

As a group of 12 ecologists and economists who have objectively estimated the average economic value of 17 ecosystems services for 16 biomasses to be 1.8 times the 1997 global GNP, have pointed out that “the economies of the Earth would grind to a halt without the services of ecological life – support systems, so in one sense their total value to the economy is infinite” (5).

Options for water saving measures or water return on region by region basis

Such option may lead to short term small improvements to the availability of water for agricultural and other non-ecological usage, but they need to be complemented with changes to our economy and population policy. For if we continue with our current growth policy, then any savings will be countered in the long term by growth. And of course, our current economy is unrealistically designed to depend on perpetual growth (3).

We therefore submit that the Committee advises that the carrying capacity of the Basin be scientifically estimated and that the policy for the Basin be based on this estimate and be subject to ecological constraints of the Basin's natural environment as is the case for example for engineering designs being subject to the constraints dictated by the laws of physics.

The role of governments, the agricultural industry and the research sector in developing and delivering infrastructures and technologies aimed at supporting water efficiency within the Murray – Darling Basin

The primary role of governments, the agricultural industry and the research sector is to acquaint themselves with the understanding of ecological processes as well as of ecological aspects of history and meaning of our humanness as detailed in the references quoted in this submission's notes so as to acquire a realistic view of the world we live in in developing the appropriate policies for achieving ecological sustainability for the Basin.

Because such policy reforms will inevitably affect the economies and employments of the rural communities that have made themselves dependent on the over exploitation of the rivers' water, an over exploitation that was promoted by previous governments' policies and from which the rest of Australia's economy profited, the governments and industry needs to provide funding to compensate the people who will be economically adversely affected by the necessary reforms of the Basin's policy.

The research sector needs also to change so as not to create unsustainable expectations of the prospects of increasing future productivity of the Basin's food production and economic growth.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we wish to express our support for the Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations' plea for the restoration of the health of the rivers, the past Murray – Darling Basin Authority Chairman Michael Taylor's claim that the Authorities obligation is to priorities the environment when establishing the "basin plan" (the Age, 8-12-10, p. 5), and for the 58 of Australia's top scientists call for returning 3000 billion litres of water to the rivers this season and 7600 billion litres next season (the Age 1-12-10), and urge that the Indigenous cultural flows be restored for all the seasons there after. For, as the Age Editorial of the 13th of December stated, "farms and communities cannot be sustained if the water and land are degraded".

We therefore submit that the Committee gives priority to the environment over all other considerations when assessing the policy for the Basin. For after all, ecology is a science that "tries to determine the conditions, laws, and principles that enable life (including our human life) to survive and flourish", while "by elevating the economy (which is a human – created entity) above ecological principles, we seem to assume that we are immune to the laws of nature" (6).

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Notes

1. See:- Catton, William R. Jr. – “Overshoot, the Ecological Basis of Revolutionary Change”, University of Illinois Press, 1982;

Suzuki, David – “The Legacy, an Elder’s Vision for Our Sustainable future”, Allen & Unwin, 2010, especially chapter 2, “Finding a New Path”, which deals with economics and the loss of nature;

Weir, Jessica K. – “Murray River Country, an Ecological Dialog with Traditional Owners”, ASP, 2009, especially chapter 6 “Deplete, destroy, depart?”.

2. See Catton cited in (1), especially chapter 14 and 15; Weir cited in (1), especially p. 134, “Acknowledging Ecocide”; and ECOS 76, Summer 1993/94, p. 30, “What must change?”,
3. See Suzuki cited in (1) pp 54 & 60.
4. See Suzuki above cited p. 38 “Economics and the laws of nature”
5. Constanza, Robert et al -“The value of the world’s ecosystem services and natural capital”, Nature, vol. 387, 15th May 1997 pp 283 – 260.
6. See Suzuki cited in (1) p. 40.