



20.12.10

The Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Australia
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam

We are a group of social scientists from the disciplinary traditions of geography, history, political ecology and cultural studies whose research focuses on the social and cultural dimensions of environmental issues. Between us we have worked with and written about the environmental interactions of irrigators, broadacre farmers, graziers, conservationists, indigenous people and urban consumers in Australia and overseas.

We address particularly the following terms of reference:

- The direct and indirect impact of the Proposed Basin Plan on regional communities, including agricultural industries, local business activity and community wellbeing; and
- The role of governments, the agricultural industry and the research sector in developing and delivering infrastructure and technologies aimed at supporting water-efficiency within the Murray-Darling Basin.

1 The trouble with the Triple Bottom Line

Section 2 of the Guide to the proposed Basin Plan (hereafter the Guide), 'The Basin and its importance to Australia', is framed around the triple bottom line of sustainability: social, environmental and economic sustainability. The triple bottom line was popularised as a means of operationalising the aims of sustainability, following the Brundtland Report of 1987. This conceptual approach has done vital work in Australia and elsewhere to highlight social, cultural and environmental issues. However, a range of public statements by various groups – farmers and their association representatives, the MDBA, and politicians – indicate a fundamental misunderstanding here by suggesting that a triple bottom line approach means equal allocations to different needs. The triple bottom line does not suggest that the three components be treated 'equally', rather that each must be considered in decision-making. Further, the triple bottom line approach does not do a good job of recognising that the categories society, environment and economy are inherently connected rather than discrete. It is now widely recognised that all three elements are crucial in decision-making. It may be time to put away and move beyond this approach, and instead focus on mechanisms of integration and interconnection (Gibbs 2006, 2009, 2010). We are supportive of the

excellent science that has informed the Guide, but contest the separability of ‘science’ and ‘environmental flows’ from the social life of the river.

2 Association and interconnection rather than binary divisions

Recent research and scholarship challenges several binaries that are key features of community debate around the Guide. We suggest that going beyond these binaries is a creative way to cut across divisive debates (Head in press). Transformative thinking is needed.

False binary 1: the river vs the rest

The idea that the river is an entity separable from its surroundings, and from human connection, needs to be challenged. What we now call the river is not only a flow of water, but an assemblage that includes connecting technologies – weirs, dams, irrigation infrastructure – as well as people (Weir 2009). The social science concepts of assemblages and networks are more appropriate than the ideal of the river as pristine nature. Indigenous connections to river and country are one important expression of this connected thinking (Weir 2009, Muir et al. 2010), providing an undervalued community resource that could assist us in the challenges ahead.

False binary 2: community vs environment

The Guide, and the process surrounding it, has framed ‘the impact of the Plan on regional communities’ *against* the ecology and environmental health of the river system. This framing misrepresents the significance of the river to those communities, and misrepresents the inherent connections between the river, river communities and economies. Rivers, and the broader environment, are not in competition with people for water; rather, people are dependant upon rivers. Communities play a key role in the health of the river, and without the river these communities will not survive (and nor will our national economy) (Gibbs 2009). The future of the rivers corresponds to the future of those dependent upon them.

False binary 3: economy vs society

The studies commissioned by the MDBA within their efforts to consider socio-economic issues are biased toward the economic (see section 7 of the Guide). While it is clear that comparable socio-cultural data is limited, and that economic information is necessary, this does not mean that consideration of social issues is completed through economic modelling or analysis. Consideration of the social requires the MDBA to consider data that moves beyond economic valuations of environment and community, data that is qualitative as well as quantitative (Head et al. 2005). Our qualitative research into climate change engagement among wheat farmers, for example, reveals cultural resources of resilience on which the wider community could draw, as well as differential vulnerability to impacts (Head et al. in press). Qualitative research into values associated with water in the Lake Eyre Basin finds that economic value does not take precedence for people living and/or working in the Basin; rather socio-cultural, environmental and economic values are inherently interconnected (Gibbs 2006, 2010).

The scale of the draft plan and its Guide are limited for understanding community-level impacts and possible solutions. For example, in using economic theories at a macro scale it is easy to suggest that growers will simply move to other locations if necessary; however, this does not take into account the social networks, sense of identity and belonging, limits to selling a property, loss of

community services and incomes, etc. that would come with such a decision. It appears that community-level data and proposals are to come in future MDBA releases, in which case the process of release was flawed and has created ill will. Having access to these assessments is necessary to understand the full situation of the communities across the Basin and for communities to better understand the MDBA recommendations.

False binary 4: urban vs rural

A fourth unhelpful binary is the urban-rural one. These regions are inherently interconnected – economically, socially, culturally (Atchison et al. 2010). The process around the plan should aim to mend this misperception, not reinforce it. Yet this binary is regularly enrolled in the debate. Pitting city against country (like environment against society) in a war of who gets access to water is counterproductive. Questions, processes, and solutions that bring together these concerns are necessary for a more sustainable future.

As an attempt to do whole-of-basin planning, the Guide is an accomplishment. However, there are many communities and individuals outside the MDB who rely on and impact upon the Basin. While these people are mentioned, they are not included in the planning. The responsibility for MDB wellbeing falls not only to those who live within its boundaries, but to all those who eat its food, drink its waters, rely upon its economic achievements and tour its beauty.

3 Process of governance: investment in communication

Community uproar over the Plan is evidence that the governance process has failed. This is arguably even more significant than dissatisfaction with outcomes, as it brings into question the functioning of democracy. The contentious nature of water use and allocation in Australia means that frustration will be part of the process. As such, investment in consultation and community engagement is vital. The process surrounding the development and release of the Guide has not sought to improve understanding and communication of Basin issues.

In particular, there is a broad lack of understanding of relevant environmental science, and a sense within the community that communication has not been clear. For example, ABC Rural reports Queensland Farmers' Federation Projects Officer, Ian Johnson, stating "We don't have an understanding of how they've got to the interception figures, the sustainable diversion limits and the environmental requirements ... We really need the Murray-Darling people to come up and engage with the communities and get down to the detail" (ABC Rural 2010). There has been a missed opportunity to explain the science and discuss the process with environmental scientists, community members, and environmental decision-makers.

Communication has at times been exclusionary. Our upper level undergraduate Environmental Management students watched and discussed the launch of the Guide (MDBA 2010). The students were struck by the jargon (e.g. frequent use of acronyms), and felt that this excluded many people from engaging with the process. Further, the students remarked on the tokenistic inclusion of traditional owners in the introduction to the announcement, with no further discussion of indigenous issues in the speech.

4 Missing impacts: food security

Considerations of Australia's food security are not present in the draft plan, despite the importance of the MDB to Australia's agricultural production for domestic and export markets. The importance of irrigated agriculture in the MDB combined with calls for a National Food Policy suggest that consideration of the needs and goals for Australia's agri-food system is necessary. For example, it is debateable whether the MDB is the best place for agricultural production, but the suggestion that agricultural production will simply move elsewhere implies that the land and water required for production are present and affordable elsewhere. This is not an accurate assumption. Further, if displaced food production is not relocated domestically, Australia will need to source its food from overseas. In this case, economic development of other sectors will be necessary to compensate for lost economic value and Australia would become more vulnerable to fluctuations in agri-food markets and global production. In planning the future of the MDB it is not enough to deal only with water issues. The residents of the MDB, along with all Australians, have other impacts to consider, including those relating to future food security.

5 Planning for extremes and dynamic environments

Historically, community members and policy makers have not prepared for extreme events of flood and drought; instead preparing for 'average' events based on past experiences and records. This approach reflects a common assumption in the wake of severe weather events that another serious event is unlikely to occur again for many years (O'Gorman 2009). A recent example is the failure of the flood mitigation levee built to protect the town of Charleville. In 1990, Charleville experienced a severe flood that reached 8.5 metres and caused significant damage to buildings and infrastructure and evacuation of most of the town. In September 2000, the local government constructed levees that would protect the town from smaller floods (such as occurred in 1997 and 1998). In 2010 another major flood led again to inundation of the town. Policy that is not realistic about the extent and severity of recurring droughts and floods is a dangerous way forward, particularly in light of climate change projections. In developing a final management plan for the Basin, decision-makers must actively guard against thinking that fails to take into account recurring extreme events beyond the 'average', and increased severity in some areas in line with climate change projections. This is vital given the socio-economic struggles of many communities during the recent drought, as well as the mounting ecological degradation of rivers and floodplains.

6 Key recommendations for action

In summary, we recommend the following:

- A 'turn around' in the conceptual framing of the Basin Plan. In particular, the document and consultation process should move beyond the triple bottom line, and the dominance of the economic agenda, and move towards challenging false binaries and prioritising connections. This move recognises the limitations of current approaches and allows us to see new opportunities.
- Invest in understanding social and cultural processes in the Basin. Further research, funding and opportunities should be made available – as part of the Plan process and on an ongoing basis – for adaptive management and exchange between all groups affected by the Plan. Consultation should always take place from the onset of the planning process.
- Better communication of the 'science' behind the Plan; in particular greater opportunity for fora involving environmental and social scientists, community members and decision-makers to discuss and explore the relevant research.

- Explicit inclusion of food security and domestic land use and land availability issue.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Professor Lesley Head FAHA, ARC Australian Laureate Fellow
 Dr Jennifer Atchison
 Dr Leah Gibbs
 Dr Emily O’Gorman
 Dr Catherine Phillips

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