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SUBMISSION TO

**The Inquiry into the impact of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan in
Regional Australia**

From

Every Voice

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Summary and Conclusion

The clear message from our small effort shows that is just the tip of the iceberg of the enormous human capital, capacity and energy that could be mobilised to develop a whole of Murray Darling Basin plan that is owned by the community. While there is enormous diversity of relationships with the river, there is an impressive shared commitment to its survival. People are connected in many ways, sometimes through their agreement and sometimes through their disagreement, but they all have a passionate interest in the future of the river.

Every Voice would like to work with the Government and the Murray Darling Basin Authority to tap into this energy, motivation and capacity of both individuals and institutions - to use creative ways to engage the communities in both a geographical and virtual way. We bring an interest and expertise in finding and presenting the views of ordinary people. We also note that in the public debate there has not yet been a focus on the views of people under 25 and Traditional Owners and would be particularly interested in including these voices.

Introduction

We are associated with a community based philanthropic organisation **Every Voice** that seeks to promote community strengthening, leadership and skills development for disempowered individuals, communities and groups in Australia through participation in arts projects. **Every Voice** recognizes that disempowered people often have minimal opportunity to have their voice heard on critical issues that affect their lives.

We think that there are many voices that are not being heard on the future of the Murray Darling Basin system and seek to bring to your attention what some of these people are saying.

Every Voice has consulted nationally with approximately 5,000 people through direct discussion, email correspondence and via a web based program entitled "PlaceStories" which encourages people to express their views using a postcard. You can read these contributions to our project at:

<http://ps3beta.com/map/#/cmtty=everyvoice#project=7824>

The accompanying map with the postcards will give you a picture of the geography of the contributors to the postcards.

Our respondents are young, old, farmers, business people, people who live in towns and cities, Indigenous Australians, environmentalists, men and women.

A summary of the postcard views and the outcomes from our email, on-line and direct discussions is presented for your information.

Summary of Input

The feedback we have received falls into 5 main categories:

1. The river system

- its health,
- its sustainability,
- the interconnected between the rivers, the lakes system and ocean
- the systemic relationships between people, river, environment and catchments

All of our respondents express a primary interest in the river system being healthy and flowing. While some people are concerned to ensure that “the livelihoods of farmers, communities, businesses and people in general” are not overlooked, overwhelmingly people want to give priority to the river system. Here are some quotes from our feedback:

“I will stay positive that in the end we are mature enough to recognise that a healthy river and a healthy community share many complex links and we will let the water flow”

“I believe the health of the river system is paramount, and it is the scare mongering by a few who are afraid to look at water efficiencies as the answer”

“We cannot take out water without consideration of the future”

“Water and air are essential life components so what happens when either of these is in short supply? Years ago it was unheard of and now is a reality of our times”

“Water flowing out to sea is not a waste. It is vital to the health of the ecosystems that live around the mouth and further out into the marine zone.....The environment needs a free flowing river with no additional engineering solutions. Nature does it for you”

2. Australia’s food future

Many of our respondents are very concerned for the food future of our nation, although many want that clearly balanced with caring for the river system.

“The choice is ours – grow food or import it? It’s not rocket science”

Fish productivity only comes from adequate replenishment of water to the system., Fish simply stop breeding and they will also stop growing as flows decline. Water replenishment means new oxygen which is life to fish”

We need to explore other ways instead of the easy fix of taking water from our food bowl”

3. Basin communities

Of course there is concern for rural communities and the need to support the people in these places to, where possible, maintain their businesses and lifestyles.

“The future of our Basin towns depends on our ability to help the river stay healthy”

“It worries me that I only really see farmers and those from smaller rural hamlets protesting, not the regional business community. I’m yet to see VECCI or Australian Industry Group comment”

“The connection between water availability, the farmer and his crop to the local jobs available at processors like Uncle Tobys, Unilever, Nestle, Riverlea and Mars ought to be reinforced”

4. The need for a plan

All of our participants express frustration at the lack of a long term plan and vision.

“A real plan, a plan that may take a while to implement, a plan with vision into our future, not a quick fix”

“We are all in this together. The destructiveness of not having a plan was evident to us at the end of the Murray in Lake Alexandrina and Lake Albert. Short term reactive decisions were made which were not good for communities, economies or the environment”

“A plan gives some security, the ability for us to plan and the hope that my grandchildren will be able to enjoy this beautiful environment. It’s far too precious to lose”

5. The process so far

The process on building a future plan for the river system appears at the stage to have suited nobody. Our contributors have expressed anger that we have come to the point we are at.

“There is hysteria being whipped up by the uncertainty of the MDB briefing”

“The noise generated by farmers has overshadowed the environmental necessity of restoring water to the environment and pitted farmers against environmentalists in an unnecessary and unhelpful way that is to the detriment of both”

“Shame on our politicians for obfuscating the message and creating unnecessary tensions between stakeholders”

“Instead of dialogue we have at present a sterile winner/loser debate between self-interested parties being played upon by politicians”

Every Voice would like to participate in and/or lead a process which is inclusive of the whole community and builds on the passion and commitment people have for the river, their communities and their economic, social and environmental objectives.