

Dubbo Weekender – Saturday May 12th, 2012
The Dangers of the Drought-Proofing Myth

It has been mentioned a number of times by some Politicians and commentators that the Murray Darling Basin Plan will ensure that the environment and communities in the Murray Darling Basin will become immune from the worst effects of drought if the Basin Plan is adopted. This is incorrect.

Towns throughout western NSW from Orange to Cobar all know only too well what droughts can do to local water supplies and despite promises nothing has been done to improve water security in these communities. There has been plenty of talk and money has been allocated but if it stopped raining tomorrow these communities would be in exactly the same situation they were in three years ago.

The MDB draft basin plan will not stop the desolate scenes witnessed throughout western NSW during a drought as severe as the drought we have just lived through. It is dangerous and illogical for politicians, policy makers and others to claim that it will.

There is still a very European view prevailing among Australia's policy makers that if the rivers are not holding a significant amount of water and everything is not green and lush, then our rivers are dying and the connected ecosystems are at tipping point and an irreversible disaster is just around the corner. Droughts are an unfortunate reality of life; and when it doesn't rain, rivers stop flowing and the animals and plants and the ecosystem which support them shrink and 'die'. Ironically they also have a habit of drowning in the floods.

Michael McKernan's book 'Drought – the red marauder' highlights the plight of an environment accustomed to severe droughts. It points out that in the severe droughts of the past, not only did the environment suffer, people perished too.

In his book Mr McKernan states:

“Writing in 1858, Charles Edward Strutt reported being told by ‘(aboriginals)of the Murrumbidgee’ of a great drought about 120 years ago (around 1738). ‘It persisted so long, ‘that the Murrumbidgee became perfectly dry, which events reduced the (aborigines) to the utmost distress, as there was no water nearer than the Murray. Many ... died, not wishing to risk the journey. Those who reached the Murray found it to be but a chain of water-holes.”

In September 2008, the Murray Darling Basin Commission (MDBC) stated that the Murray River was reported to have stopped flowing between Tocumwal and Moama in 1850, and again in 1902 (for six months). In the 1914-1915 drought, flows in the Murray reached very low levels.

The MBDC report states:

“Modelling has also been used to simulate flows in the Murray under natural conditions; in other words, if all dams and weirs did not exist and no water was extracted from the system. This modelling demonstrates that under natural conditions the Murray would have ceased flowing during the more severe droughts, including the current dry period. In the last couple of years, a continuous flow along the length of the Murray has been maintained by drawing upon water stored upstream, particularly in Hume and Dartmouth Reservoirs when other tributary inflows are low.”

In a South Australian Government document titled 'Controlling the River Murray in South Australia' it states;

“The River Murray in its natural state was far different from the river we are now familiar with. During long drought periods, not necessarily in South Australia but in the river's catchment region, the river ceased to flow and became a series of salty water holes.”

The simple unavoidable fact is that if we didn't have human intervention in MDB then our rivers including the Macquarie and Lachlan would have become dust bowls incapable of supporting life during the last drought. Many more native species both fauna and flora would have perished and whole communities would have had to have been evacuated.

To combat droughts, and stop people from perishing, we have evolved highly regulated river systems involving dams, weirs, locks and irrigation schemes to ensure there is water when and where it is needed. This ensures the 2.1 million people who live in the MDB have access to water even during times of climate extremes.

Another five million people from Melbourne and Adelaide rely on water piped out of the MDB when their own water catchments are running low. Despite having direct access to seawater for desalinated water, both these cities increased their reliance taking water from an already stressed MDB system.

In January 2007 advice to the Basin States and Commonwealth Government made the point that over 30 towns in New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia, including Mildura and Bendigo, were considered at risk of running out of water and had no alternative water supplies. Hence the then Murray-Darling Basin Committee (MDBC) recommended to the governments that:

“unless there are very substantial early inflows (into storages in the basin) there will be insufficient water available to allow any allocation at the commencement of the 2007-08 water year for irrigation (not including stock and domestic licenses), the environment or any purpose other than critical domestic supplies.”

As a direct result, existing water sharing agreements were suspended and emergency measures were introduced. Since 2007 the only major infrastructure works to increase water security in the MDB were undertaken in the Australian Capital Territory which is building a new dam (interception scheme) twenty times larger than the dam it is replacing, and will transfer up to 100 megalitres of water per day from the Murrumbidgee River through a 12 kilometre underground pipeline to Burra Creek in NSW.

The ACT Government official policy is to recognise that during dry times when Canberra's population faces Water restrictions it is appropriate that environmental flows also be reduced. Melbourne has finished building a billion dollar pipeline with the capacity to take water out of the MDB when its' own water supplies fall below 30 percent.

If similar drought conditions were to occur again after 2019, the Basin Plan would also be suspended to ensure that not only the needs of people who live in the MDB, but those of Melbourne and Adelaide are also met. Therefore, the current Murray-Darling Basin Plan cannot be considered a tool that could potentially be used to mitigate the effects of severe drought on the MDB.