

Save Our River – a cry from the Heart

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Birds on the Coorong SA - taken 1980.

As you drive along the Coorong you take in some picturesque scenery, with sand dunes, bays and islands nestled in this long narrow lake. If you happen to stop at any of the retail outlets along the way you won't need to do too much prompting before the shopkeeper is complaining about the government, and what isn't being done fast enough about the parlous state of their once beautiful environment. If it happens to be a warm summer day you'll know why they're complaining. If the breeze is

coming from the wrong direction, the stench wafting up from the shore can be overwhelming. It's the smell of brine shrimp – one of the few organisms that can still inhabit this highly saline water.

Associate Professor David Paton, Adelaide University, has been studying the ecology of the Coorong and his reports indicate how serious the problem is. Many of the aquatic plants have disappeared, along with the fish that feed on them. This has led to a massive decline in the numbers and diversity of the creatures at the top of the food chain – the birds, for which the Coorong is most famous.

The Murray River has long been a vital source of life. The water from the river sustained our indigenous inhabitants and subsequently our settlers. Cities and country towns alike have come to depend on the water from the river, but as cities have grown our demands on the water have increased, with more drinking and household water and irrigation being taken every day. For nearly 200 years it hasn't been a major problem. Every two or three years there would be a flood somewhere and the system would be flushed out, leaving plenty of water in our dams. But the Murray hasn't had an above average flow for more than 16 years. The Coorong is a long narrow watercourse that unfortunately lies south of the Murray mouth, and it needs regular flooding to keep saline levels stable.

Professor Mike Young, Research Chair of Water Economics (Adelaide University, Ref. 1) says, 'The bottom of the Coorong has collapsed. Lake Albert has said if we take any more water out of it I'll die.' Poisonous substances being released by the mud, 'it's like getting car batteries and emptying all the acid into the lake. We can't do that so we then sacrifice Lake Alexandrina and take it even lower. We are running the system down and it creeps back up then to the locks and ... Adelaide Pipelines.'

Take a trip to Chowilla Reserve, north-west of Renmark. You don't need to go too far beyond the lush irrigated vines and oranges before you're in a complex system of billabongs, bow-lakes and backwaters. Huge redgums line the river, but only a few hundred metres away is mallee country, as the natural rainfall here is low.

Chowilla Reserve is home to a delicate ecosystem of wetland species. When the system is working properly, these billabongs will be inundated every few years by regular floods. They become alive with lush vegetation and an abundance of fish, frogs, reptiles and birds. They gradually dry out over a year or two and the small perennial plants drop their



Milang SA. on Lake Alexandrina. Note Jetty and boat ramp out of the water. Mt Barker Courier March 5th 2008.

seed and die, or remain underground in root or rhizome form. There are large She-oaks and Eucalypts in this area that can go for years without water. But these trees are dying because the floods haven't come for over 16 years. The Government is pumping water into some streams in an attempt to remedy this, but the soil saline levels are so high in places that it may be too late. And the demands for water for irrigation and drinking mean that such projects are not guaranteed.

Difficult decisions have to be made. Mike Young (ref 1) says 'what those

who depend on the river want and need is a regime that commits first to maintaining the river. We probably can't keep all the iconic sites going and as a person who's fought long and hard to restore the environment I worry about that but I do think we are going to have to sacrifice some of the environment, but it is going to have to be carefully worked out from top to bottom. It's not just "write off the lower lakes and that will fix it". It is not just Lake Albert and Lake Alexandrina, it's all the lakes up at Broken Hill, it's lakes in Victoria, lakes in NSW. You have to look at opportunities to save evaporation from top to bottom'.

People from the river towns want tourists to come and visit the river. It is still a beautiful place to spend time. Great wisdom is needed, tough decisions need to be made and urgent action is required. I encourage all Wellspring members and friends to take time to visit the Murray River and observe and listen to the river. Please pray for courage and wisdom for the new Federal Management of the Murray Darling Basin and members of COAG (Council of Australian Government) as they make decisions about the future of the river. We are thankful for all who are working hard to solve the problems and have compassion for those who are sacrificing for the sake of the river and those who will be asked to sacrifice in the future.

Sources:

1. Professor Mike Young – Adelaide University, Excerpts from Interview on ABC Stateline, 18th April 2008.
2. Doug Bickerton –Ecologist -Dept for Environment and Heritage, South Australia. Contribution and information.

Useful web sites:

<http://rivermurray.com/html/management/associations.html>

<http://www.mdbc.gov.au/>

Email contact: info@rivermurray.com