

Letter from a Friend

Time to plan for the next phase of waterway management

Now that I have left the immensely interesting but often stressful world of policy development and re-entered the academic sphere, I have a bit more time to reflect on what I learnt in government.

Looking back, they were an amazing 25 years in waterway management. Over that period, some truly enormous changes occurred.

- Rivers, once regarded as major threats causing significant damage, are now seen as community assets valued for their contribution to local environments, social well-being and regional economies.
- From being paid minimal lip-service in water allocation, the environment is now an equal player, with virtually every river having either a sustainable diversion limit, operating rules or an environmental entitlement. We now have institutions established to manage environmental entitlements efficiently and effectively and we have watched the birth of the new discipline of environmental water management.
- The level of government and community investment in river and wetland restoration leapt over this period, with funds for on-ground river works coming from programs like the Natural Heritage Trust, National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality, Caring for Our Country, and state programs. On top of this, we had some really impressive water recovery programs like the Wimmera–Mallee Pipeline, The Living Murray and, of course, the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, about \$13 billion, one of the biggest river restoration programs in the world.

A substantial part of this change occurred during the ‘millennium drought’ — proving once again that good policy makers and managers never waste a crisis. They ‘surf the wave’ and use it as the impetus to embed the next phase of water reform.

It’s important to really think about the drought — what actually happened from an environmental perspective.

For much of the country, it was the longest and most severe drought on record. In Victoria, at one stage, nearly every town was on highest level water restrictions (or equivalent), storages were at record lows, irrigation allocations started at 0% and most of the unregulated rivers had total bans on pumping. The community stress was real and palpable.

And yet, through this, as we made some very difficult decisions about how to allocate and manage an extremely limited volume of water, the environment was a key consideration in decision-making and an equal player at the table. This didn’t mean there weren’t decisions that had impacts on the environment; after all, much of this was about critical human needs. What it meant was, the environmental impacts of these decisions were clearly understood and everything possible was done to mitigate them. These decisions were debated and under considerable scrutiny. Nothing was a *fait accompli*. And amidst the pressure to augment supplies and make sure the situation we found ourselves in would not be repeated, the focus was on alternative water supplies as far as possible to minimise environmental damage and provide a degree of climate independence.

We’ve truly come a long way in 25 years. In Australian natural resource management I doubt we’ve seen such a significant change before, or in such a comparatively short time. What generated the change was a convergence of community and scientific concern, creating a political imperative that, when coupled with the reality of the drought, gave policy makers the opportunity to generate action and garner funds.

Success generated the impetus for further action — and the good economic times didn’t hurt either.



Peter Cullen’s role in this cannot be over-estimated. He provided expert leadership and was a key focus for commonsense comment and advice.

So, what now? The drought ended and we have returned to wetter conditions (at least for the moment). We’re in a time of austerity in terms of government funding and programs. And, in the wake of the Basin Plan, people are tired of the controversy of reform and they just want some time to consolidate.

We are in a predictable lull between water crises, and just as you never waste a good crisis you should always use the lull to prepare for the next wave!

In my view, we have lots to do, to develop the narrative for the next phase of waterway management. We have to:

- acknowledge the investment and effort, and show the community just how good the results of 25 years of management are.
- show maturity and sophistication in the development of policy and management frameworks, and demonstrate that we do understand and can optimally balance the conflicting community objectives for river management.
- turn the initial environmental problem into an accepted, ‘business as usual’ ongoing management task.
- stop complaining, demonstrate that we understand the task and how to do it and, given funds and opportunity, get on and deliver it.

This requires us to really think about our management models, bring in the science, and develop a narrative on which to build a united front for the ‘third wave’ of waterway management.

It’s what I’ll be working on over the next few years and I look forward to engaging with others who want to work on these goals.

Never, ever, waste a good lull!

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Friend of the Peter Cullen Trust