

the **basin**  
**BULLET**

the voice of desert channels queensland

next  
page

exit



**Christmas New Year  
2005 / 06 Issue**

**IR.**

**THE SHEDS ARE BURNING**  
The power of the Unions  
is burning with the new  
Industrial Relations legislation  
as surely as shearing sheds  
burned a century ago.

**How will the new IR laws affect regional Australia?**

# As I See It

Welcome to the Christmas (December / January) issue of the Basin Bullet. A little thin this month owing to DCQ folk disappearing on annual leave. The February issue of the Bullet will be back full bore with recipes, art and craft and personality profiles once more.

Not that there's any lack of reading in this issue. We attempt to get a regional take on what the new Federal Industrial Relations legislation will mean to people in the Desert Channels Region.

We take a peep at where the big dreams of nationalistic development projects have gone – projects like the Bradfield Scheme. As a nation have we lost the ability to dream? Or are we just maturing into a responsible, grown-up nation?

We have the usual roundup of what's happening in Desert Channels Queensland including a look at the production of the latest DCQ video.

It's summer time and the reptiles are out and about – Steve Wilson introduces us to that controversial resident of the region – the Mulga Snake, erstwhile known as the King Brown.

And there is some Christmas fiction reading with the latest contribution from our own Nonnie Mouse – 'The Christmas Wish'.

There are busy times in the DCQ offices at present, with much shuffling of office space to fit in quite a few new faces as the structure is streamlined to more effectively supply services to people and organisations within the Desert Channels Region. We will meet some of these new people in the January Bullet.

So from all at DCQ a very merry and peaceful Christmas to all and all the best for the New Year. See you in 2006.

*Bruce Honeywill*

## In this Issue

### **The Sheds are Burning:**

The Federal Government has forced through the new Industrial Relations reforms with its control of the Senate – How will this affect regional Australia.

### **Where Have the Big Dreams Gone?**

Have we seen the last of the big national projects, has the Bradfield scheme been permanently shelved? Has the Australian nation lost the ability to dream or are we just growing up?

### **Making Movies at DCQ:**

The Basin Bullet goes on location with the production of the latest video explaining the concepts behind "Protecting Our Assets".

### **Catchment Roundup:**

The latest goings on from the DCQ team.

### **When Brown is Black:**

Steve and Coen Wilson reveal the secrets of the Mulga Snake – or King Brown – with some important clues on staying alive should the worst happen.

### **The Christmas Wish:**

Christmas fiction – holiday reading.

# THE SHEDS ARE BURNING

**The power of unionism is today burning as surely as the shearing sheds of wool producers burned a century ago in the revolution that saw the birth of national unionism and the Labor Party. In a turn of time, the current Federal Government has reduced the collective voice of the Australian worker to its lowest whisper in more than a century. It remains to be seen whether this is a good or a bad thing.**

It comes as no surprise that these Industrial Relation reforms have been incubated by Prime Minister John Howard for decades. The Australian business lobby seems certain there are elements of this reform that will smooth out employment operations for business owners. But what does it mean for those of us who live in regional Australia?

## The Legislation

This 700 page tome has received criticism from both the business lobby and unions as being too big and filled with confusing legal complexities. The main selling point for acceptance of the legislation, from the Government and business lobby, has been a predicted increase in productivity and increased employment.

The main changes the legislation will bring about in the workplace will be a drastically reduced ability for employees to bargain collectively for wages and conditions, a reduction in the reach of labour law – where awards

covered 20 matters previously, they will now cover a more vague and reduced category of five items for full time workers and three items for part time workers. So there will be a big shift in bargaining power. Under the legislation, a Union will now take at least six weeks to get through the red tape to initiate a legal strike. On the other hand, employers can lock out employees in dispute with Australian Workplace Agreements on three days notice.

The Government says there is an adequate safety net:

- It will still be unlawful to get the sack for being pregnant, taking time for family responsibilities like caring for a sick child, for temporary absence from work because of illness or injury or for membership of a Trade Union.
- It will be unlawful to be sacked for failing to negotiate an AWA.
- There will be recourse for any individual who considers their sacking unlawful with support of the Office of Workplace Services.

This of course opens a wide range of causes for legal



sacking, removing a large degree of responsibility of employers for their employees wellbeing.

The whole basis of equity within the new IR system is based on free market economics. The underlying assumption is there is always present a wide range of job vacancies and a strong population looking for work. Under this assumption, if an employee doesn't like the conditions offered by one employer, he or she can shop around to find an employer and job that suits the individual's needs.

This assumption collapses in the bush, where skilled and unskilled labour is scarce and jobs are often in short supply. Peter Corish of the National Farmers' Federation says primary producers are having trouble getting workers. "There are plenty of jobs out there at present," says Mr Corish, "a kid is not going to work under adverse conditions. We found workplace agreements work very well in our situation and we have a lot more flexibility in the system."

Mr Corish says regional Australia has skilled and unskilled labour shortages. The mining industry has met this shortage by offering high wages

and attractive packages. Should people on the land consider the same? The mines are direct competitors in the labour market of regional Australia. But primary producers say they cannot afford the high price of labour introduced by miners and remain profitable. According to free market economics, the basis of IR reforms, if a business cannot afford the labour to operate profitably it should close down. Where does this leave regional Australia?

**“... with drought and the collapse of wool prices where does this ‘strong economy’ thesis leave the boom bust nature of regional Australia?”**

The basis for workers’ rights established a century ago is that a worker’s labour is his or her resource, his or her capital. The worker has a right to negotiate the sale of that resource, to withdraw it from the market if not valued highly enough. These were the basic tenets of the politics of labour. Australia’s new IR reform legislation does not remove these concepts, but it does remove the choice of how this labour capital can be negotiated. If an employer does not wish to bargain collectively (with a union), he can choose not to. An analogy to this can be seen in primary production’s single desk industries. Wheat growers and the sugar industry have used a single desk to negotiate export deals with other countries. The reaction has been fierce when other countries have tried to negotiate with individual growers. This is collective bargaining, little different to the way unions bargain for the value of labour. And this is what is being dismantled with the new IR legislation.

Workplace Relations Minister, Kevin Andrews,

says the new reforms are based on choice. He says neither employers nor employees should be compelled to make agreements they do not want.

And it is this choice that is the banana skin on which the unions are slipping, unable to negotiate with an employer who does not choose to negotiate with them. So unions are being forced to find other means to acquire leverage when an employer won’t bargain with them.

The ACTU’s Greg Combet proposes that employees should be able to collectively bargain through a union if there is a democratic vote in the workplace for that to happen.



***Australia’s labour revolution started in the shearing sheds more than a century ago. Has it come full circle?***

Minister Andrews refutes this: “We are not supporting a proposition that by simply having a majority of the workforce demand a collective agreement, that there should be a collective agreement.”

He says the greatest protection for all is a strong economy, “I mean, if you don’t have a strong economy, then you’re not going to be able to provide the employment we want and we believe that these changes are important in terms of meeting the challenges to ensure a

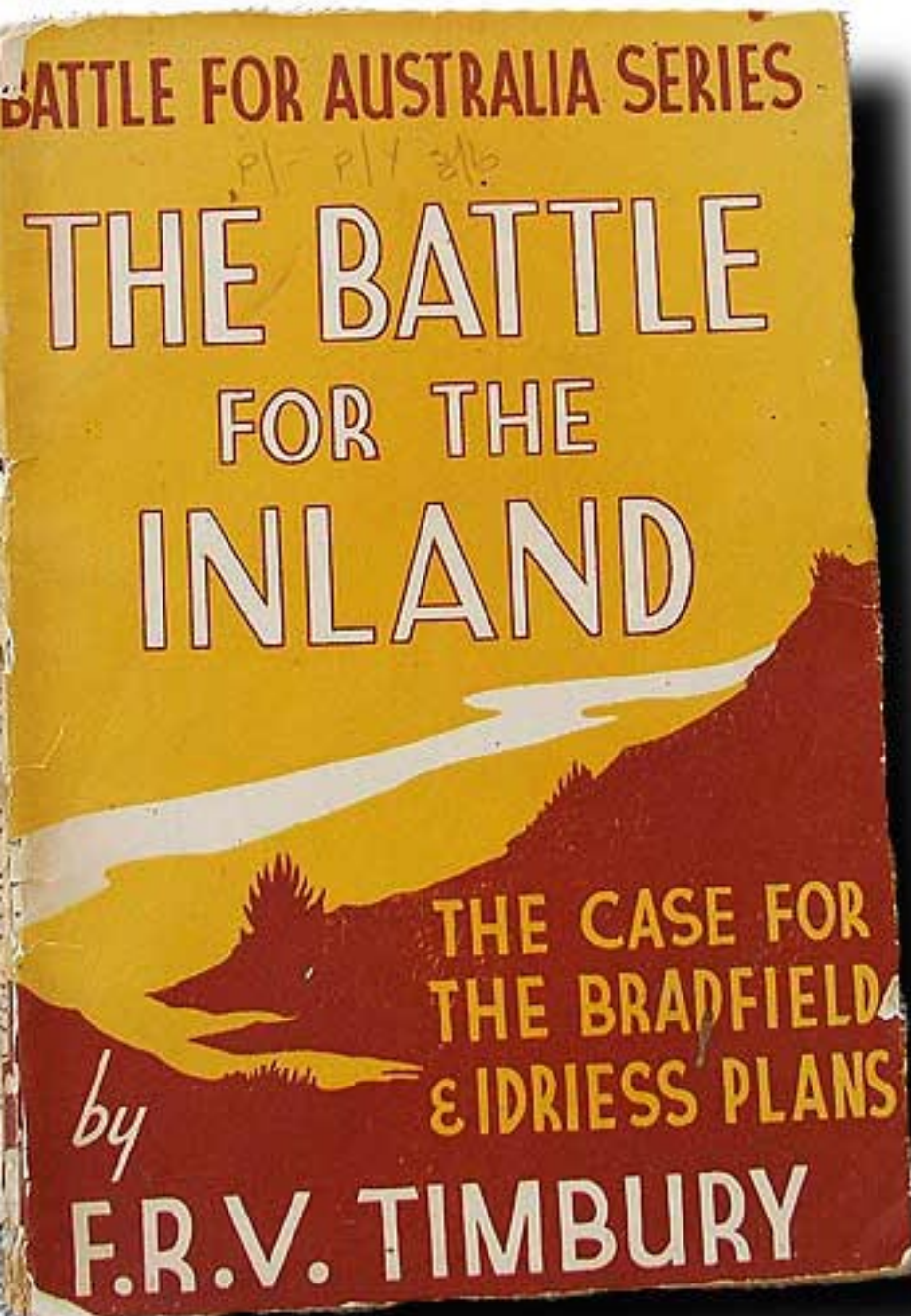
continuing strong economy.”

Fine sentiments but with drought and the collapse of wool prices where does this ‘strong economy’ thesis leave the boom bust nature of regional Australia?

National Secretary of the Australian Workers Union, Bill Shorten, says individual workers will now always be at a disadvantage when negotiating for conditions with large and powerful companies. He is critical of the Government’s moves, through the IR reform, in taking adjudication of disputes away from the Industrial Relations Commission and making it the responsibility of the new bureaucracy, the Office of Workplace Services. Mr Shorten says, “If the government were serious about enforcing legal standards in agreement making, it would not be removing this authority from the tested and trusted umpire, the AIRC.”

The Government’s predictions of productivity increases and growth in employment opportunities have been criticised by academics since the release of the legislation as being unfounded. Even Peter Costello’s own treasury appraisal, released last week to the embarrassment of the Treasurer, indicates little productivity improvement or more jobs will come from the legislation.

The bottom line is the new legislation is with us and a major step forward made in the disenfranchisement of unions. So while the towers of union power are torched by this legislation and other reforms, it is up to the average Australian employers and workers to ensure fairness and equity remain in their workplaces.



## Where have the **BIG DREAMS** gone?

**HAVE THOSE BIG DREAMS OF DEVELOPMENT FOR OUR NATION BECOME AN IMPOSSIBILITY? WILL THERE NEVER BE ANOTHER DREAM THE SIZE OF THE SNOWY MOUNTAINS SCHEME, THE MURRUMBIDGEE IRRIGATION SCHEME? WILL ANOTHER ORD RIVER DAM EVER BE BUILT? WILL THE BRADFIELD SCHEME REMAIN FOREVER COLLECTING DUST ON BOOKSHELVES AND IN THE MEMORIES OF OLD MEN? HAS THIS NATION LOST THE POWER TO DREAM?**

In the early years of federation, big schemes and dreams of nationhood grew with an evangelistic fervour. Men pored over maps of Australia so recently coloured in with details. They played as men will with blocks of wood, moving excess water from high rainfall areas to areas of low rainfall. They built fantastic cities in the desert. They created a nation in the image of their European forebears.

A century on ... have we lost the power to dream? The Murray and its tributaries were harnessed; irrigated farmlands became the bread basket for Australia and a fair chunk of the world. Irrigation schemes sprouted all over Australia. Agricultural exports underwrote the wealth of the nation. But those big dreams of verdant inland cities never eventuated. Inland Australia remained slave to boom bust cycles of drought and flood. And the dreams turned to nightmares.

The costs of rehabilitation of the development and exploitation of the Murray Darling systems have proven to be astronomical – billions over the next decade, a huge bill to be paid by all Australians. This is the basic inequity of

national development – publicly funded schemes with huge ongoing rehabilitation costs with profit limited to a small number of irrigators, employees and communities. The lessons of the Murray Darling development is that the true cost of the commodity (water) needs to be paid by those gaining an advantage from the development and this pricing must include future rehabilitation.

People still dream of big schemes. The Bradfield scheme does not seem to want to go away, and some politicians and national figures are still promoting it in the 21st century. Selwyn Johnson, Independent Member for the North Queensland Federal seat of Leichhardt, is still an active proponent for a revised Bradfield Scheme as we move into 2006.

The Bradfield Scheme was devised by Doctor John Bradfield and presented publicly in 1938. Bradfield was the bloke who designed the Sydney Harbour Bridge and was a consulting engineer on Brisbane's Story Bridge, so he was a man who thought in BIG terms. The plan was, through a series of dams, to divert water from the upper reaches of the Johnson, Tully, Herbert, Burdekin and Flinders Rivers into the Thomson and down the Cooper system to Lake Eyre. This impounded system would run permanently allowing huge irrigation development throughout inland Australia. With Lake Eyre

permanently topped up, evaporation would create a mini climate over inland Australia with increased rainfall. A Garden of Eden straight from the pages of Genesis.

At the outset, the scheme attracted much support throughout Australia in a time when fighting the boom bust cycle of inland Australia was seen as a battle for Australia. This adversarial approach to the environment persisted up until recent decades. People like the then-celebrity writer Ion Idriess vocally supported the Bradfield scheme.

**“the scheme attracted much support throughout Australia in a time when fighting the boom bust cycle of inland Australia was seen as a battle for Australia”**

However the scheme attracted criticism from the start. Today the main objections are seen as:

- The huge cost;**
- The extreme evaporation in the interior without any guarantees that this will fall as rain where it is needed;**
- Coastal developments such as the Burdekin leave much less water to distribute inland;**
- No scientific basis to increased localised rain, in fact plenty of examples of where this does not occur (Sinai Desert, Horn of Africa, large dams on the Nile);**
- Environmental and economic protests to re-**

**duced ocean flow causing environmental impacts, perhaps destroying large sections of the Great Barrier Reef and affecting fishing in the Gulf of Carpentaria;**

**•The high cost of water to users to take in future rehabilitation costs will mean irrigation water will be available only for the highest value cropping.**

So big dreamers still exist. But we have become a nation educated by our mistakes and it is a sign of maturity that we do not rush to make them again. We can't fight nature. A scheme like the Bradfield scheme would be miniscule compared to some of the geologic changes wrought on this continent in times recent in geologic terms. The landscape would settle to these changes, after all the Cooper ran permanently and brimful for around seven million years (from 15 million years bp when its course was turned from running North to the Gulf to the South West where it (and the Georgina, Diamantina and Finke) filled Lake Eyre until the drying times 8 million years bp).

The short term dangers will be the costs of rehabilitation, of damage to our current balance of salinity – all the lessons we have learned from the big schemes of the past century. But this is no reason for men and women not to dream ... like children as we grow into adults, the dreams are just harder to turn into reality.

# MAKING MOVIES AT DCQ



**THE LATEST IN A SERIES OF VIDEO PRODUCTIONS MADE BY DCQ HAS BEEN COMPLETED. PRESENTED BY DCQ'S COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER, MARK KLEINSCHMIDT. THE PRODUCTION EXPLAINS IN SIMPLE TERMS DCQ'S NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN.**

The morning is windy on top of a red sandstone mesa in the Diamantina catchment. Mark Kleinschmidt practises his lines, his script cracking in the wind like a bull rider's shirt tail. The newly risen sun is ideal for the shoot ... but the wind!

Video producer Bruce Honeywill is huddled under his ear-phones, playing with various settings of his microphone, attempting to filter the wind noise so as to record Mark's voice. An attempted shoot the previous evening had to be aborted because of heavy cloud.

The sandstone mesa country was selected to show, over a series of videos, the various landscapes of the Desert Channels Region. A previous production, also presented by Mark Kleinschmidt, showed typical black soil sheep country of the Longreach Region in the Cooper Catchment.

Mark is wired with a lapel mike. Placing it under his shirt was found to be the best answer to the wind. He tucks his script into his back pocket, takes a deep breath as the wind plays havoc with his hair.

"Rolling," calls Bruce.

Another deep breath, face the camera and, "Community managed groups like Desert Channels Queensland play an important role in ..." and so it begins.

"We have found video an ideal way to simply introduce people to some of the complicated concepts we have to deal with to ensure ongoing funding of on-ground projects," says DCQ Chief Executive Leanne Kohler, "this production 'Protecting Our Assets' explains DCQ's Natural Resource Management Plan and how it fits in with the Regional Investment Strategy."

Dry material to be sure, but the video productions attempt to bring it alive. And these concepts are the building blocks of ongoing funding in the government – non-government organisational environment of 2006.

# DCQ Catchment Roundup

The shoot, carried out about an hours drive out of Winton, was completed in a couple of hours. On return to Longreach Bruce Honeywill selected the best 'takes' of Mark, selected all required footage and music was chosen. "A good country feel was chosen this time," says Bruce. A week spent staring into the computer and the production was ready for preview by Leanne Kohler and Independent Chair Peter Douglas.

The narration was intended to be done by Mark Kleinschmidt, but a dose of the flu precluded the use of his voice, notwithstanding this, the production was completed on schedule.

Copies of the Protecting Our Assets video or print publications are available through DCQ – 4658 0600



*Documentary Producer Bruce Honeywill on location in the Diamantina Catchment while making DCQ Video "Protecting Our Assets".*

**T**he **Georgina / Diamantina and Cooper Catchment Committees** held a joint general meeting in Birdsville, 17th & 18th November. The meeting discussed several issues that dealt with matters within the catchment. Of great importance was an update on the Georgina / Diamantina Catchments' Water Resource Operations Plan and its implications for people in the catchment. Other matters discussed were the committee's applications to DCQ's Protecting Our Future program's devolved grant round for the development of catchment specific weed decks and a series of 2 posters. The weed deck will be focusing on assistance with identifying weeds of significance within the GD catchment and the posters would be a collection of two A1 size posters. The first poster will contain the identified pasture plants of the GD and the second will identify poisonous plants and weeds within the catchment as well. The catchment committee also has begun discussions on the development of signage for the catchment that will focus on informing the reader of the historical, cultural and natural values of that particular area. The committee will be approaching the Cooper Creek Catchment Committee, the Desert Uplands Committee and the Desert Channels Board to extend the signage project across the desert channels region. Membership of the committee is now being sought and if you are within the GD catchment and interested in attending the next meeting please contact the Desert Channels Queensland office on 4658 0600.

## Indigenous Program

**D**esert Channels Queensland and the Fitzroy Basin Elders Committee hosted a Great Artesian Basin – Water Resource Plan (WRP) workshop in November. Traditional Owners from regions and other regions within the GAB attended the workshop in Barcardine. Issues discussed at the meeting dealt with 'who owns the water' to the cultural values of the GAB springs to Aboriginal people and in particular Traditional Owners. Another matter discussed was the perceived lack of 'good faith' expressed from the government in its consultations with the community, particularly traditional owner groups. Attending members agreed that a WRP submission be lodged expressing their request to be included, and considered, as a major stakeholder in the GAB ROP process when it is put to public comment. The meeting expressed its concern at being included at the end of this process instead of at the beginning. The DCQ Board has made available \$150,000 for Indigenous specific on-ground projects that will be advertised early 2006. This funding program will be aimed at the protection, renovation and management of Aboriginal sacred areas within the DCQ region. For more information and assistance please call David Thompson, Indigenous Facilitator on 4651 6033.



# WHEN BROWN IS BLACK!



**Snake lovers claim the Mulga Snake is one of the world's most beautiful snakes - not everyone agrees! The Mulga snake is one of the deadliest inhabitants of the Desert Channels Region. Once known as the King Brown, this misnomer in itself has proven dangerous as the Mulga Snake is not a brown snake and anyone unfortunate enough to be bitten needs black snake antivenene. Father and son natural historian team Steve and Coen Wilson bring us the details ...**

The Mulga or King Brown snake *Pseudonaja australis* is the largest and most widespread member of the genus *Pseudonaja*. This genus contains the six members of the black snake group which include: Collett's snake *P.colletti* from Qld's dry interior; Papuan Black snake *P. papuanus* from Saibai Island Torres Strait and New Guinea; Spotted Black snake *P.guttatus* from eastern Australia; Spotted Mulga snake *P.butleri* from the arid interior of WA; Red Bellied Black snake *P.porphyracus* from coastal and adjacent inland eastern Australia and the Mulga snake *P.australis* from across Australia

and New Guinea. It is unfortunate and risky that the Mulga snake is called the King Brown in some regions and that large Brown snakes (Genus *Pseudonaja*) are even called 'King Brown' snakes. Mulga snakes are often large and brown, however the danger lies when snake bite victims are administered brown snake antivenom and not black snake antivenom. This incorrect treatment is potentially fatal as the two venoms behave quite differently in the human body. Misidentification of snakes implicated in bites has occurred, particularly in remote areas, so we are strong advocates for consistency across Australia in calling the species Mulga snake. Venom testing capabilities are not always avail-

able in remote areas which complicates true identification in some cases. Large animals have few natural enemies, and will often stand their ground if caught out away from shelter. Cranky and aggressive if provoked, Mulga snakes inflate their bodies and recoil ready to strike. Highly venomous, this species has caused human fatalities and should be treated with respect. Reputed to carry greater quantities of venom than all other Australian snakes, a good bite from a large specimen would have serious implications particularly if you were in a remote

area away from medical help. Average venom yield is around 180mgs, with a maximum of 600mg recorded from a single milking which is an amazing quantity. The toxicity of venom is usually measured by calculating the LD 50 (50% lethal dose), which is the amount of venom needed to kill 50% of the animals into which it is injected. Mulga snakes release enough venom in single bite to kill 50 per cent of a total of 5,000 mice! Mulga snakes are listed in the top ten of the world's most venomous snakes, most of which are predominantly Australian.

Mulga snakes, particularly in arid areas, are often encountered on roads at night. Animals are often seen regularly in the same area. For example, in Longreach western Qld where we live, a very large Mulga snake is routinely seen sunning itself about 10.00am most days in the nature reserve on the edge of town. Cane toads *Bufo marinus* are growing in numbers in western Qld so we hope Mulga snakes from our region don't suffer the fate that many of the more tropical zone animals have.

The wide distribution of Mulga snakes across Australia is testament to their ability to adapt, find shelter and prey in most habitat situations. We have seen Mulgas actively hunting out in the treeless plains of the Mitchell Grass Downs, sheltering in the cracking clay soils, at the same time we have observed them in harsh sandy dune country and escarpments. A feature of many of these habitats, particularly the arid zones is the long periods between rainfall events. Very rarely do you see an emaciated Mulga snake; they always look plump and healthy, despite the conditions at the time, a testament to their adaptability.

In open Mitchell Grass Downs country after good heavy rain, we have witnessed Mulga snakes lying on their sides exposing their bel-

lies to the sun. One can only presume they are thawing out after being drenched in their underground shelters. It is quite a sight to see a two metre plus snake behaving this way. Mulgas will feed on a wide variety of prey items. We recently spoke with a grazier from the Stonehenge region of western Qld who said he once picked up a large Mulga snake which upon capture regurgitated a five feet long carpet python! Hatchling and young Mulga snakes no doubt would be prey items to many predators including goannas, birds of prey and other snakes including large Mulga snakes. Black headed pythons *Aspidites melanocephalus* are consummate snake feeders and would take young and possibly even

bigger specimens of Mulga snake if given the opportunity. Unfortunately many Australians would only see a Mulga snake when it is road kill. Those animals, along with countless other species are either accidentally or actively pursued on our roads. This is not the best way to appreciate these amazing snakes. The best place to see one of these animals is from a safe three to four metres. They usually will behave calmly at this distance, particularly large animals. A good snake is not a dead snake; a good snake is a black snake, the Mulga.

## Mulga Snake

*Pseudechis australis*

Family Elapidae

Also called King Brown Snake

### Identification

True to the genus *Pseudechis*, Mulga snakes are large solid animals with a distinctive broad triangular head and regularly grow in excess of two metres, with some specimens pushing close to three metres in length. Part of the confusion with identifying this animal is the high variability of colour, which can range from light brown to red, to olive green, even black. The belly scales are usually cream to white in colour. One of the most distinctive features of Mulga snakes is the body scales which are two tone and large in size. Each individual scale has a dark and light area, which gives the snake a distinctive pattern.

Distribution and Habitat

Found throughout Australia except in Tasmania and Victoria, this adaptable species is able to utilise a range of habitat types from tropical forests to the arid inland deserts. Greater numbers are found in inland dryer regions

### Biology

Depending on the ambient temperature Mulga snakes will forage both day and night. When sheltering they will use rock

cavities, hollow logs, cracks in the ground, animal burrows and debris. Prey items include frogs, mammals, birds, their eggs, other snakes and lizards. Mulga snakes despite some variations tend to breed in spring and summer. Males do engage in ritual combat, behaviour not often witnessed. Females lay between 4 and 20 eggs, wild incubation times are poorly known, presumed to be around 2-3 months. Captive animals have hatched out after 70 days incubation. Hatchlings emerge around 200 to 250 mm in length and are independent from the egg.

### Further reading

Cogger, H.G. (1994). *Reptiles & Amphibians of Australia* (Revised edn). Reed Books, Chatswood, NSW, 788pp.

Swan, G. & Wilson, S. (2003). *Complete Guide to Reptiles of Australia*, New Holland Publishers, Sydney, NSW, 480pp.

### About the authors

Steve Wilson BAppSc is a naturalist and Regional Co-ordinator for Desert Channels Queensland, a community-based natural resource management organisation based in Longreach Qld.



Theme Deveraux worked his family property an hour's drive out of Winton. As a boy he explored the scorching valleys of sandstone and lancewood, his tough young legs injured to the bite of spinifex. Plucked rudely away to boarding school, Theme's heart seemed empty away from the red hills and the little valleys laced by dry creek beds. Throughout the years of schooling, his heart remained empty but always beating in tune with this country of red stone. On return from school, working along side his father, his heart once more filled. Good seasons, Patti coming into his life, their two children. Theme's life was complete; no cup was large enough to hold the completeness welling from Theme Deveraux's heart.

A wise man may well have predicted such complete happiness as that of Theme Deveraux would eventually be confronted with the tidal nature of human contentment. Theme's tide went out in a rush, his cup of happiness replaced with a bitter draft of grief. How it happened was now a blur in his memory. Four years ago. The four wheel drive wagon rolled and burned. Patti and Trish and Shane gone, leaving behind an intense emptiness. His father's death 12 months before the car wreck left Theme bereft of human support, but he had his landscape. He found solace in

repetitive work. When he was totally lost he would climb into the Toyota, dogs on the back, and run his waters, a ritual part of his being since childhood, his earliest memories sitting beside his father bouncing over these same tracks, tracks that in his grief soothed the serrated cut of pain. An afternoon sun painting bloodwoods gold, snow drifts of lime profusion of tiny gumnuts tumbling over the canopy of the trees. In the blood red flat-topped hills of the Diamantina he would climb and sit on a rock and look across the beauty of the valleys, the plain of the Diamantina rolling out to the distant horizon and his grief, this black internal animal would emerge in heaving sobs and the run of tears and dust glinting golden as the day ended leaving Theme Deveraux with nothing other than to return to the dark and empty homestead, populated only by memories.

Theme found it hard to go to town, walking the main street, seeing an old friend or acquaintance and wishing he could shrivel and hide behind Winton's rubbish bins strangely moulded in the shape of green dinosaur feet. Friends were always glad to see him but conversation was stilted and awkward, or worse some well meaning family friend expressing sorrow. What can anyone say? His grief was so beyond words the futility of conversation urged him to avoid it. But in early November, Winton's main street was simmering when a child with a smiling face rushed at him. The girl was about Trish's age, or Trish's age when ... Theme did not know the

girl, perhaps one of the teachers' children. "We're raising money for our school excursion," the girl's enthusiasm bubbled through her words, "for a dollar you can get your Christmas wish." Theme dug a two dollar coin out of his jeans' pocket and following the girl's instructions threw it into the crudely built cardboard wishing well. "Don't forget to wish," said the girl. Making a wish meant believing in a future. Theme Deveraux realised that for years he had not allowed himself to think beyond the now. Making a Christmas wish confused him, hurt him. His face twisted as he looked at the smiling face of the girl and wished to have children and happiness around him at Christmas time, and then quickly pushed the thought aside.

The promise of early summer storms was once more broken by the fickleness of climatic cycles. The rugged valleys and pockets of Theme's country scorched in summer heat. Mirages flooded the flat lands, windmills moved through the mirages in the twisted contortions of dancers in a rage club while trees levitated free of gravity above the land surface. The cattle moved silently across this landscape, their day a repetitious ritual of walking and foraging and walking and watering, heads down blocking the heat, heads occasionally lifting breathing the hungry air searching for a scent of a distant storm. Theme returned to the homestead. He had become used to the household mess, reacting against the order that Patti had brought to his world. The phone rang. Nearly four years since the tragedy, the phone these days only rang on business, agents or contractors wanting to discuss everyday matters of running the property. It was Heather Matheson. From a neighbouring station, he had grown up with her and with Patti and the kids had often shared barbeques and swims at the waterhole with Heather and Reg and their three kids. Theme and Reg had grown apart, Reg never knew what to say to Theme and long uncomfortable silences were easier to do without. "Listen Theme," Heather was fired up, "I have a favour to ask. A friend of a friend of mine is looking for somewhere to stay.

She's a European and wants to stay on a cattle station for a month or two. She's happy to work."

"Heather, you know I can't ..."

"Bullshit Theme. If she does nothing else but clean up the house a bit and you take her on a run around the place occasionally. Do you the world of good."

"I'm not ready to deal with people, anybody."

"You'll end up a dried up old man before your time if you don't force yourself to engage with people, and start living some sort of life."

"What is she, some sort of backpacker?"

"She's from Finland and just wants to see outback Australia. No strings Theme, she's a close friend of a good friend of mine. So I'll tell her it's OK to stay with you."

"Heather..." But Heather had hung up.

Ilge was forty something, fit from world travel, her legs and arms the impossible brown of Northern Europeans. She hefted the backpack from the back of the Toyota and, slung over one shoulder, carried it to the homestead verandah while Theme carried a carton of stores into the kitchen. They sat in the warm evening air on the verandah, cool drinks in hand. Conversation didn't flow but Ilge seemed comfortable in the silence. It was this feeling of comfort that soothed Theme's unease.

Ilge fitted into life on the place with that same comfort. Her English was good, she was quietly spoken. She didn't try to revolutionise the house with cleanliness, but quietly, almost unobtrusively brought order to four years of chaos. Theme protested that he didn't want meals cooked for him and Ilge quietly retorted she had no intention of cooking for him or any other man; she had had enough of that in her life. But quietly meals arrived and routine moved slowly into the household. Theme's attitude changed from verbal protestations to helping Ilge prepare food. For the first time in four years Theme's diet approached healthiness. And in the paddocks, Ilge's interest in everything swallowed them. Theme felt himself

re-engaging with life as he explained how the wind powered the pumping of sub-artesian water to the surface, how the unpredictable seasons made livestock production a continual guessing game. In the glaring heat he described the wonder of floods, how all these creeks ran, how the river spread over the flood plains, the wonder of grasses and flowers growing lushly as the water receded. He enjoyed the small moments of watching a spinifex pigeon's corroboree, their mating dance with heads bobbing, the crest spike a baton to the music of their p'coo call, tails fanned high.

Ilge was worldly, carried her own history lightly. Theme knew little of her other than she had a broken marriage behind her. Ilge's presence brought the multi-dimensional richness of human interaction to Theme's life. And as he settled to having her around, he could not help but noticing the shapeliness of her legs, the hard swell of her buttocks under her shorts, the lift of her breasts under her work shirt, the femaleness of her voice, of her eyes and the scents of femininity and its accoutrements in the bathroom. And these little flashes of awareness triggered waves of guilt and grief in Theme. He would drive off, sit on his rock outcrop and talk to Patti. Confess his thoughts, beg her forgiveness.

A week before Christmas Ilge was helping Theme lift a ladder against a polythene water tank about fifteen kilometres from the homestead. As the ladder lifted into place, Theme and Ilge's faces were only centimetres apart. Theme took in her eyes, her scent, her closeness. His hand gently touched her neck and he bent forward to kiss her. Ilge pulled away abruptly, "No Theme."

Embarrassed Theme mumbled apologies, words stumbling from his mouth. Ilge told him it was fine, but they sat in silence on the drive back to the house. Before getting out of the Toyota, Ilge reached across placing a hand on Theme's forearm.

"I think it is best," Ilge told him, "if I go over to Heather's. Could you please drive me over this afternoon?"

The days running up to Christmas were empty for Theme. He felt confused and upset at Ilge's rebuttal. He did not feel guilt, only confusion. And emptiness again settled on Theme, now even more acute in Ilge's absence. He missed their talks over an iced drink on the verandah, sharing meals, sharing work

around the place. Christmas loomed. 'Doesn't mean anything to me', Theme told himself, 'not any more, not without the kids.'

The phone rang on Christmas Eve. It was Heather. "We're coming over tomorrow." There was not a hint of request in her words just a statement of what will be.

"But Heather..."

"No buts Theme, and don't worry about food, we've got too much over here. We'll be there about midday." And she was gone. 'Where's Ilge?' thought Theme, Heather didn't mention her.

Reg and Heather's wagon, dusty from the trip over, pulled up in the shade of the bauhinia at midday. The three kids rushed in. How they had grown. They hugged Theme like a long lost uncle. Amanda, Trish's age, was now a teenager. Reg and Heather and Ilge walked slowly towards him, carrying trays and bowls of food. Theme was surprised at the feeling within him as he watched Ilge walk towards him, in a knee length white skirt. She was smiling, this the first time he'd ever seen her in a dress. Merry Christmas.

After lunch, they sat on the verandah, a slight breeze penetrating the bougainvillea. Reg and Theme were chatting as they had not been able to do since before the tragedy. The constraints that had held them apart were gone. Ilge sat next to Theme. Heather asked her "What part of Finland do you come from, Helsinki?"

"No," replied Ilge, "from way up north, a town called Rovaniemi."

Amanda looked up suddenly, "Rovaniemi? That's where Santa comes from."

Ilge just smiled and Theme suddenly saw the smiling face of the child in Winton, and heard the dull thud of his two dollar coin hitting the bottom of the makeshift wishing well as he struggled to make a Christmas wish.