

# the **basin** **BULLET**

the voice of desert channels queensland

**WILD  
RIVERS**  
NOW LAW IN QLD  
SPECIAL FEATURE!

**THE LACHLAN  
BEAUTIFUL ... BUT DYING?  
Flood Plain Graziers Conference, Dubbo**

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# HORROR STORIES

**FLOOD PLAIN GRAZIERS FROM THE MURRAY DARLING AND LAKE EYRE BASINS MET IN DUBBO ON SEPTEMBER 21ST AND 22ND. PARTICIPANTS FROM THE DESERT CHANNELS REGION HEARD TRAGIC STORIES OF DYING RIVERS, OF FLOODPLAIN GRAZIER'S LIVELIHOODS BEING TAKEN FROM THEM BY OVER-EXTRACTION OF WATER UPSTREAM.**



There can be no tragedy in the natural world as horrifying as that of a river dying. Yet the same story was told over and over from river systems in southern Queensland and New South Wales, first hand stories of grazing operations - some 150 years old - being driven to the brink of collapse., Rivers with dams or large water extraction upstream retreat into the main channel and the floodplains die, floodplains that were traditionally the heart of these grazing operations.

The conference, 'Rivers, Wetlands and Flood-

plains – Trash or Treasure' was a gathering and forum for floodplain graziers and communities, with representatives from the upper reaches of the Lake Eyre Basin rivers right down through the Murray Darling system. It was a forum for like-minded people who found the space and support to express concern, frustration and anger at what was happening to their rivers and properties.

And as one Longreach participant said, "I was really surprised at how much damage has been done

in the past five years. This is not something that happened years ago!"

A common thread soon emerged as individual stories were told: floodplain properties without any water over their flood plains for five years or more because of over-extraction of water upstream; manipulation of environmental flow regimes by strong irrigation and cotton lobbies so the flows stay within the channels; turning floodplain, boom / bust systems into regulated rivers staying within their banks, an emulation of the European river model rather than the boom / bust, flood / dry-time model of Australia's inland rivers.

The story of dried and dying floodplains and wetlands, the deaths great stands of River Red Gums and Coolibahs, the disappearance of huge flocks of breeding water birds, the economic hardship of the floodplain graziers became stories told over and over, on a variety of river systems. And scientists, experts in their field, supported the anecdotes of the graziers with hard facts of the effects of drying on floodplains and wetlands.

## Where has all the water gone?

The life of these river systems is being sucked dry by irrigators; there was absolutely no doubt shown throughout the conference about that fact. Cotton growers came in for their fair share of criticism but, strangely, the tone of the conference wasn't 'blame irrigators' per se. Rather, successive Governments and government departments who made allocations of water with culpable negligence; water licenses and allocations without any unbiased Environmental Impact Studies, without Social Impact Studies; decisions made with





**Conference Coordinator Sue Jones from the Maquarie Marshes and professor Richard Kingsford, drivers of the conference**

flagrant disregard for landholders who relied on flood flows to make a living for generations – and many of these decisions have been made in the past decade, in an age when the Australian population considers itself enlightened on matters environmental.

### **The Conference**

The conference was opened with a traditional welcome to country by Mal Burns, a member of the Weradjeri group of the Dubbo region and a poem 'The River' written and read by Longreach poet, Helen Avery.

The official launch of the conference was made by an unpunctual John Anderson, Federal Member for Gwydir and former Deputy Prime Minister. Mr Anderson left immediately after his talk on the National Water Initiative and its commission – attracting the wrath of the outspoken Senator Bill Heffernan: "I'm angry, bloody angry! These politicians who blow in and blow out make me angry. These conferences are a complete waste of time unless we can get the decision makers sit through these stories on days like today so they might under-

stand what's going on!"

Waste of time or not, the conference went ahead, hearing stories from people like

Pop Petersen from Brenda on the Culgoa River. Pop grew up near Longreach before moving with her husband to Brenda to rear their family. Both the river and the business viability of Brenda have dried up following the major upstream extraction by Cubbie Station. Cubbie's huge ring tanks have a storage capacity of more water than can be fitted into Sydney Harbour. Pop says, "This has been done without any consultation, without any environmental impact studies. We rely on floods for viability and we haven't had a flood for more than five years ... we used to get at least one a year whether we were in drought conditions or not."

**"I'm angry, bloody angry! These politicians who blow in and blow out make me angry."**

### **Desert Channels people have their say**

A range of people from the Desert Channels region spoke of conditions on the Cooper, Diamantina and Georgina systems. They spoke of river systems in remarkably good order in comparison with the horror stories coming out of the Murray Darling system.

Angus Emmott from Noonbah on the Thomson River spoke of the benefit of biodiversity on the floodplains and the fact that having a variety of wildlife, insects and birds is a barometer of the health of pastures and there is a direct correlation between biodiversity and beef cattle production on the floodplains.

Maree Morton comes from Innamincka Station in South Australia where she and husband Graham manage the property for S Kidman and Company. Maree, a DCQ Board member and Chair of the Cooper's Creek Catchment Committee, described station life on an arid country property and how the floodplains are essential to the viability of this place on the Lower Cooper.

Similarly, Bob Young spoke of life on Brighton Downs on the Diamantina. His selection of PowerPoint slides showed a landscape in stark contrast with the

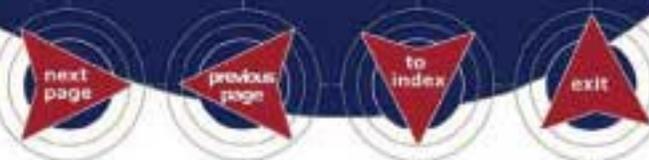
soft green banks of the Macquarie River at Dubbo. He spoke of an unregulated river where the boom / bust nature – the irregular and unpredictable flooding – underwrite the profitability of the AA Company property he manages.



**Bob Young of Brighton Downs on the Diamantina takes his turn at the podium**

Cooper's Creek Catchment Coordinator, Nora Brandli recounted the attempt of cotton irrigators to gain a foothold on the Cooper in the 90s and the backlash of public opinion that saw the consortium withdraw their interests.

Speaking from the floor, Allan Hubbard from Galway Downs, spoke of the necessity of graziers and landholders to be united and the need to build trust between scientists and pastoralists and government and





**Science heavyweights brought the facts to support the floodplains graziers' stories - Prof Stuart Bunn and Prof Angela Arthington of Griffith Uni.**

only when this trust is established will decision making be able to move forward.

For two days they spoke: landholders, floodplain graziers, and the full gambit of scientific research – professors and doctors and scientists working in the field, talking about counts of birds, and counts of water fleas, and how these natural barometers of a river's

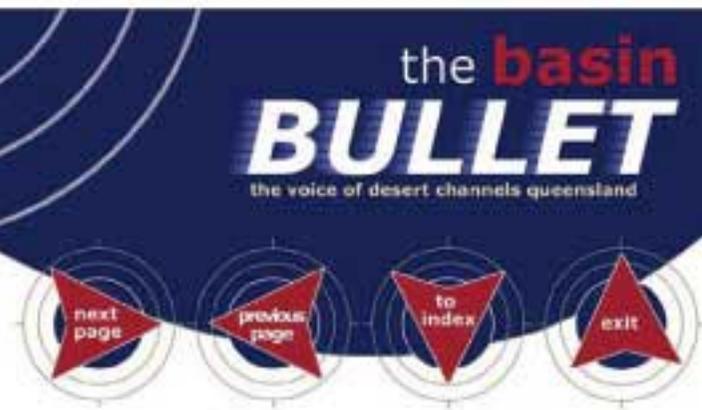
health are deteriorating in many rivers. The prognosis is not good.

To conclude the conference a series of motions were put and the well run conference stumbled a little in the face of democratic decision making. The end result was four main conference resolutions:

- (1) That an association of floodplain graziers and communities be formed;**
- (2) That a small steering committee be formed to work through suggested resolutions and develop priorities for the new association;**
- (3) That the new association become a National Voice for floodplain graziers and for it to immediately become vocal on issues of river health and sustainability;**
- (4) That floodplain graziers be recognized by governments as formal water users along with irrigators and to be included in consultations about water allocations along river systems.**



**Representatives from the DCQ Region, from left Bob Young, Brighton Downs, Allan Hubbard, Galway Downs, Angus Emmott, Noonbah, Maree Morton, Innamincka, Helen Avery, Nogo and Nora Brandli, Cooper's Creek Catchment Coordinator. Sandy Kidd (absent) was refuelling his plane.**



**What did the DCQ people think of the conference?**

Bob Young: “The Conference highlighted the problems in New South Wales, the amount of damage already done is horrendous, we must take this message home.”

Maree Morton: “It’s been a big eye opener for me, it pushes the fact that we need to protect our rivers.”

Alan Hubbard: “Getting this group together is the first step and we have to be united. We have seen the dangers here and they are reality, these things are happening to rivers here in the Murray Darling, we have seen these results, we have to stay united.”

Angus Emmott: “Major water extraction will destroy the integrity of the Lake Eyre Basin, and that means our future will be destroyed. It’s the future for our kids and their kids that we have to fight for now!”



**THE DINGO IS THE PREDATOR AUSTRALIAN FARMERS LOVE TO HATE. AFTER TWO HUNDRED YEARS OF ATTEMPTED CONTROL, THE FIGHT AGAINST DINGO AND WILD DOG PREDATION SEEMS TO BE A LOSING BATTLE. SCIENTISTS ARE SUGGESTING WE GOT IT WRONG, VERY WRONG!**

**S**ociologists are quick to point out that the dingo filled a cultural niche in European settlers, replacing the wolf of nursery rhyme and myth. The dingo became a symbol of the 'wildness' that had to be conquered so the landscape could be turned to the will of the new settlers 200 years ago.

And our dingo lived up to the myth. Quiet death, gliding through the night, the soulful howling that sets spines a-tingling. Sheep and poultry, calves and foals, all massa-

cred; a combination of truth and story creating the myth that we still live with today.

But what do we know about the dingo? Quite a bit, particularly from research carried out over the past three decades. The facts are that the dingo is an able predator. Predation on sheep flocks in particular has forced wool producers out of the industry and into cattle production. The dingo is a high cost item in the attrition column of pastoral accounting.

Has this always been the case? Probably, but some researchers are suggesting that human intervention and attempted control of dingo populations, even modern 1080 baiting, may have actually increased predation by dingoes rather than reduced it.

So have we got it badly wrong? What is the dingo story? Research has revealed the dingo came to Australia probably somewhere between 4,000 and 5,000 years ago, so it is a relative newcomer. The introduction post-dates human habitation by at least 50,000 years. Genetically pure dingoes exist in Australia, throughout the Indonesian archipelago, New Guinea, Malaysia and into Thailand. The Thai dingo is now seen as the origin of the breed of dingo that was eventually introduced to Australia. There is good evidence that the Thai dingo has been domesticated for up to 10,000 years.

With DNA research, the closest relative to the Thai dingo lineage seems to be the Indian wolf. Work done on this relationship, and other research, has seen the dingo reclassified as *Canis lupus dingo*. There are distinct differences in the physiology and genetics of the dingo when compared to the domestic dog. The dingo

has larger canine (holding) teeth, female dingoes come into oestrus only once a year (compared to twice a year for domestic dogs), and male dingoes are able to breed for only six months of the year. Amongst the genetic differences coming from DNA analysis, the dingo has a simple connexus of three gene series related to coat colour while the domestic dog has twelve. And of course the dingo howls but does not bark.

Domestication of Thai dingoes has been significantly different to the domestic dog in that it has been described as a more 'remote' association where the dingo learned to scavenge villages and camps to survive and the humans in turn used the dingo as a food source, as a hunting aid and to a lesser degree as a companion.

Researchers generally agree the first dingoes came to Australia with a wave of immigrants (or perhaps Asian seafarers) during the period four to five thousand years ago. They were probably used primarily as a food source during the traveling periods, particularly when making canoe crossings to Australia.

### **“Dingoes came to Australia only 4,000 years ago”**

Dingoes apparently went two ways after arriving at Australia. They were still maintained as domesticated canines living with the people but also quickly established themselves in the wild. The fact that the Thylacine (marsupial or Tasmanian Tiger) became extinct on the mainland of Australia around 4,000 years ago lends credence to the theory that the dingo out-competed this older carnivore on mainland Australia, but in Tasmania, where the dingo did not reach, the Thylacine continued

until shot out in the early part of the 20th century.

A challenge for anthropologists may exist with dingoes being an important creation myth animal for many Aboriginal language groups in Northern Australia. But is there a line somewhere on the Australian mainland south of which the dingo is not part of the creation story or songlines, perhaps indicating the people below this line are from an earlier migration wave than those in the North. Whether the dingo is a key cultural indicator is a challenge for young anthropologists of the future.

The bottom line of the dingo story is that at European settlement, around two centuries ago, the dingo was widespread throughout mainland Australia. The dingo undoubtedly entered the life and survival of the new farmers and settlers as the replacement for the wolf myths of the 'old countries' and so labeled soon met all the expectations as an able predator of farmyard animals.

### **“How could we have got it so wrong?”**

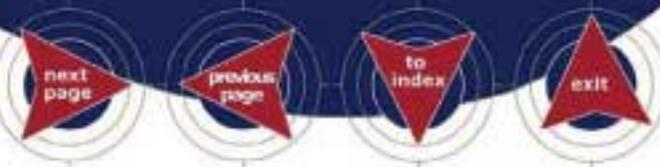
Immediately, forms of control were introduced to 'rid' the bush lands of the dingo. Shooting, trapping baiting were all introduced at an early period. These are still the main methods of control albeit poisons and their application have become more sophisticated (aerial baiting of 1080 poison). These methods have been used for more than 200 years, yet wool producers in the Blackall region – and other places – are being forced out of sheep in this 21st Century. To use bureaucratic terminology, the projected outcomes and mandatory outputs of this two century long control attempt just do not seem to have been achieved.



### **Dingo or Wild Dog?**



Government Departments and regulators prefer the term 'wild dog' to cover feral dogs, dingoes and cross breeds in the bush. The Basin Bulletin feature uses the term dingo to represent the pure dingo and will use wild dog to describe feral and cross bred domestic dogs. Further complication arises when consideration is given to the (perhaps) older bush person who uses the word 'dog(s)' to mean purebred dingo – the terms describing the occupation of dogger and dog fence originally had relevance to purebred dingoes.



So if this is the case – how could we have got it so wrong? The conservative nature of pastoralists and farmers, believing the answer always lay in a ‘bigger hammer’, has probably got something to do with the outcomes. Also the crash of the wool industry and dry times around 1990 saw many wool growing operations let go the maintenance of dog-proof fencing. A different farm culture of ‘agri-business’ saw an end to a grandfather poking around a property on his old bay horse with traps in a split bag over his horse’s neck and his own very special dingo lure in a bottle. The old bushman had time to track a dingo, lay traps and for the most part eventually get it. The new ‘bushy’ culture looked for industrialized answers like mass baiting of 1080.

So why hasn’t this worked? Why has dingo control been one of the major failures of the Australian bush? Lee Allen is a principal scientist with the Queensland Department of Natural Resources and Mines. He developed a theory some years ago that broadcasting 1080 baits may have a deleterious effect on dingo control and in fact it may encourage increased predation. In other words large scale 1080 baiting may actually be causing more livestock deaths than if it had not been introduced. Lee Allen’s theory is simple. Left to their own



Pic by Angus Emmott

devices, dingoes set up a complex social hierarchy, ruled over by alpha (boss) dogs and females. Breeding and predation is controlled socially on a ‘need’ basis. And research over the past 35 years has shown that in this social structure, the dingo’s diet consists of more than 80 per cent small reptiles, small marsupials, some birds, and even insects. The remaining 20 per cent is made up of larger animals such as rabbits, wallabies and kangaroos. Sheep and calves have never been a food of choice according to this research. Of course given a dry time any carnivore will prey where it can, but even here the natural attrition (bogging, malnutrition) of livestock supplies more than enough ‘roadkill’ to supply the dingo’s needs.

### “Large number kills by a solitary dingo may be driven by sexual frustration”

This later research is showing that widespread 1080 baiting is killing the dingoes incumbent in the social hierarchy. With the alpha adults gone and a ‘never ending’ supply of juvenile and young dingoes, ferals and cross breeds in vacant land, they quickly fill the vacuum. These animals are of similar age and without the social structure of dominant elders they have a tendency to run in packs and with fierce competition are at times inclined to kill for the sake of it resulting in the horrendous pack kills described by many graziers.

Research has also shown that large number kills by a solitary dingo may be driven by sexual frustration (male or female). With a strong breeding cycle coming only once a year, a solitary adult can become savagely frustrated and will kill larger numbers of sheep or lambs taking only the kidneys

or kidney fat.

The future of dingo predation is seen as mixed. Purebred dingoes are now in danger of extinction as crossbreds move across the country, often with the ability to breed twice as often as the purebred dingo. Now that it is probably too late, many are seeing the demise of the original dingo hierarchy as actually exacerbating wild dog predation in Australia.

With hindsight many now see micromanagement of dog free areas (maintaining property and intra-property dog-proof fences) and maintaining original hierarchical populations of pure dingoes in cattle and vacant lands a better balance. But it’s too late for that, and producers now have to find a way through the mess left by preceding land managers.

What will we leave for our grandchildren? Perhaps decisions cannot be made until we accept the new research as it comes to hand and take a wider view of the problem of wild dogs instead of hammering away at the same old nail with a hammer that technology allows us to make bigger and bigger.

**Research for this feature comes from Zoologist Laurie Corbett’s book “Dingoes in Australia and Asia”, from ABC Radio interviews by the author with DNR&M Scientist Lee Allen. The author (Bruce Honeywill) worked for a short time with CSIRO and Laurie Corbett on early dingo research in the N.T.**

**D**esert Channels Queensland is currently conducting the annual review of our Regional Investment Strategy (RIS). This involves tweaking the RIS to reflect changing circumstances and to show how funding (external to the RIS), that we've managed to get hold of, meshes with the RIS and our regional plan objectives. The other really tiny outcome of this review is that it's needed to convince the Government to pay us our next year's funding.

## Staff Positions

**O**ur erstwhile Feral Man, Damian Byrne (Project Officer for the Cross-Catchments Weeds and Feral Animals Initiative) has left us to fulfil family commitments. Damo has done an outstanding job in the position and has been a tremendous team member. He leaves with great reluctance and will be sorely missed.

His position is currently being advertised as is that of a Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting Officer. This latter one is a new position critical to the ongoing success of DCQ and how we report the outcomes of our work back to Government.

## Funding

**D**uring October we will be releasing a \$300,000 devolved grant round of 'Protecting our Future'. Protecting our Future is a fully integrated initiative aimed at getting the projects we fund delivering benefits across all our assets (Land, Water, Biodiversity and Community). In addition, we have allocated \$150,000 to devolved grants for

Indigenous Cultural Heritage.

Our hot pursuit of the number one issue for our land management community, weeds, continues with our recent application for \$1.8 million over 3 years from the federally funded, Defeating the Weeds Menace initiative. This one is specifically for weed eradication and control devolved grants and will be a boost to our very successful Cross-catchments Weeds and Feral Animals Initiative. We also have a second application in for \$600,000 to research the effects of prickly acacia on the biodiversity of the Mitchell Grass Downs. Stay tuned to see how we went with these.

## Meetings

**T**he Annual General Meeting of Desert Channels Queensland Inc will be held at 8.00am on Thursday 27th October at the Jumbuck Motel, Longreach. This is on the second day of a two day general meeting.

The annual combined meeting of the Cooper Creek and Georgina Diamantina catchment committees will be held at the community hall in Birdsville on 17th and 18th of November.

The next Desert Uplands meeting is at Alpha on the 16th November followed by three days of field trips.

**DCQ ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING  
Longreach 26 and 27 October (AGM)  
8.00 am Thursday 27 October**



## Indigenous Program Update

**T**o boost the DCQ Indigenous Land Management & Heritage Program's funding, a proposal will be considered by the Board to provide a devolved grant round with scope for on-ground works to be carried out for Indigenous-specific projects within the region.

The proposal provides a tool to develop long-lasting and positive relationships between landholders and Aboriginal people. The main focus of the program will be on-ground works involving the protection, management and recording of sites and/or areas of significance to Traditional Owners within the region. Another focus will be the development of formal agreements between Traditional Owners and landholders in managing these sites in a way that benefits both parties.

**Wondering what on earth the RIS might be? Maybe you are not too sure of the role of DCQ in Western Queensland, or some of the groups projects. These subjects are tackled briefly and in an entertaining way with DCQ's DVD productions - email [info@dcq.org.au](mailto:info@dcq.org.au) for your free copy.**



## Cooper's Creek Catchment Committee

The CCCC's exciting Wise Urban Water Usage pilot project is gaining momentum with four shire councils (Aramac, Barcoo, Isisford and Longreach) seeking funding to trial water-saving devices. Things like anti-evaporation blankets and discs for town reservoirs, soil conditioners to improve water retention, and wastewater reuse systems will be trialled over the next three years. The results of these trials will then be made available to other councils within the catchment.

Underground watering systems, grey-water reuse, and low water-use plants are keys to that other part of the Wise Urban Water Usage project, 'gardening in arid environments'. If you would like to share what has and hasn't worked for you in your garden (watering ideas, suitable plants including hardy local natives), please contact the Cooper's Creek Coordinator, Nora Brandli on 4758 0600 or [nora.brandli@dcq.org.au](mailto:nora.brandli@dcq.org.au).

Several Catchment Committee members travelled to Dubbo to the recent "Rivers, Wetlands & Floodplains – Trash or Treasure?" workshop. Organised by The Sustainable Floodplain Communities Association, the workshop looked at the plight of rivers, wetlands and floodplains downstream of large water extractions. It was a clear reminder of what could have happened to the Cooper if proposed extensive irrigation and large-scale water development had become a reality.

The annual combined meeting of the Cooper and

Georgina/Diamantina catchment committees will be held in Birdsville on 17th and 18th November. Tradition has it that it rains at Birdsville when we hold combined meetings, so if we're not back in the office you'll know we're enjoy the wet at Birdsville!

## Georgina/Diamantina Catchment Committee

The GDCC has a new face in the coordinator's role for the next couple of months. David Thompson, DCQ's Indigenous Facilitator, has taken on the acting role of GDCC Coordinator while Shaaron Stevenson is acting in DCQ's newly created Monitoring and Evaluation Officer role. With a new round of Protecting our Future funding coming up, two of the GDCC working groups will be looking for some dollars to progress their activities: the Weeds Working Group to publish a 'weed deck' to aid in identification and control of weeds; and the Tourism Working Group to get interpretive signage up around the catchment. The Georgina Diamantina Resource Operations Plan (water) Working Group will be putting together the Committee's response to the draft document.

David is also maintaining his Indigenous Facilitator position and reckons combining the two will give the people in the catchment a chance to speak about the two matters in one hit. Later on this month, he is travelling throughout the catchment, with DCQ's Regional Coordinator, Steve Wilson, to catch up with people and promote the upcoming joint catchment committee meeting to be held in Birdsville on 17th and 18th November.

## The Desert Uplands Committee

The Desert Uplands Committee held their AGM and welcome Anne Cocking as treasurer, Frank Lawrence who replaces Serg Pelizzari as deputy Chair and Jane Dickson. Janelle Wheeler remains as Chair.

Most National Landcare Program projects have been completed with the Balfes Creek and Lower Cape Landcare groups attending a property mapping workshop and the Upper Cape Landcare group nearly ready to complete their seed dispersal project.

The Committee has offered Kerri Woodcock, the coordinator of the highly successful Queensland Landcare Conference, a position as project officer which she has accepted. Kerri's initial focus will be the native timbers project.

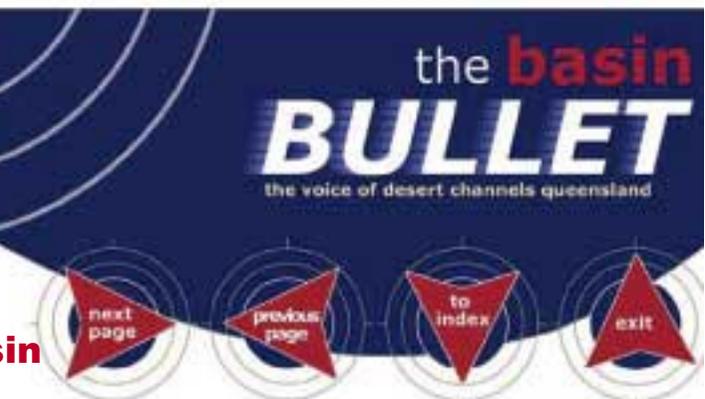
A series of field days to be held around the Desert Uplands region from 16th to 19th November will be focussing on current and future projects and funding opportunities. Locations for these are yet to be decided, so keep an eye out for further announcements. The Committee and staff are keen to see as many landholders and community members as possible.



# Comment:

All interested people are invited to write their opinion on what's right or wrong on any issues affecting the people and landscape of the Desert Channels Region. This week grazier Angus Emmott gets the ball rolling.

## Major water extraction will destroy the integrity of the Lake Eyre Basin



In Dubbo, on the 21-22nd of September, I attended the first national conference of the Sustainable Floodplains Communities Association.

Members of the CCCC and the GDCC, and several scientists gave presentations about the LEB. These highlighted that in spite of some impacts, after more than one hundred years of pastoralism, the Basin is in great shape.

This was in stark contrast to the stories from the Murray-Darling system, where wetlands and floodplains are being starved of flooding events. In these systems there has been a major over-allocation of water extraction licences, which has had the effect of reducing or eliminating the connectivity between floodplains and main channels. This is having the effect of change in composition and distribution of flora, major die-back in red-gum forests, invasion of exotic species, and reduction and absence of water bird breeding colonies.

It is clear that for the Lake Eyre Basin there are two options. **Option One** is to continue down our present path, gradually increasing development in an ad hoc manner, ending with similar problems as those experienced in the Murray Darling Basin.

**Option Two** is for the community to take a long term, strategic review of natural resource management in the basin. We could maintain the biological integrity of the LEB, maintain natural or near natural flow regimens, and learn from the mistakes of the past.

If we were to take this route, it leaves open huge opportunities for the future i.e. organic beef and other clean, green marketing, tourism etc.

A unique opportunity is open to us. The LEB is an area of about one sixth of Australia, and it is in good shape. We have the responsibility to take the long term view, and to make decisions now that leave options for the future.

Major water extraction will destroy the integrity of this basin.

*Angus Emmott, Floodplain Grazier*

### THE BASIN BULLET

The Basin Bullet is the official newsletter of Desert Channels Queensland. The brief of the eZine is to provide quality journalism on a range of subjects that interest and affect people interested in the Desert Channels Region, as well as supplying up to date information and news on the activities of Desert Channels Queensland.

The eZine is published with the belief that debate over issues is an important factor in finding a way forward. All features are written and photos taken by the independent editor Bruce Honeywill unless otherwise noted. DCQ News and Roundup from DCQ Staff.

eZine design and compilation Bruce Honeywill, cover design Jo Glasheen, DCQ coordinator and subeditor Mark Kleinschmidt. Letters to the editor, Opinion pieces, any comments please email to the editor:

[bhoneywill@bigpond.com](mailto:bhoneywill@bigpond.com)

# WILD RIVERS



**THE CONCEPT OF WILD RIVERS IS NOW LAW IN QUEENSLAND, THE FIRST AUSTRALIAN STATE TO EMBRACE THIS TYPE OF LEGISLATION. THE DEBATE FOR AND AGAINST WILD RIVERS HAS BEEN ONE OF POLARISED OPINIONS, LOUDLY EMOTIONAL AT TIMES. BUT WHAT DOES THE WILD RIVERS LEGISLATION MEAN FOR RESIDENTS IN THE STATE'S RIVER CATCHMENTS?**

**T**he legislation is the first in Australia to take on the concept of 'wild rivers' or 'heritage rivers'... that is, giving some legislative protection from over development to rivers that still run free, without major dams, impoundments or extraction.

At the time of writing no Queensland rivers have been declared Wild Rivers under the new legislation, although the process of declaration is being started for up to 19 rivers, mostly in the Gulf of Carpentaria catchments and Cape York.

The idea of Queensland's wild rivers came as a surprise to many in the run up to the 2004 Queensland State Election. However, environmental groups had been beating a path to state natural resources ministers and the Premier's office with the Wild River concept for years.

In the last days of the 2004 election campaign, the Wild Rivers proposal had a relatively leak-free birth and the campaign promise was produced live and kicking on the table like a fresh-caught fish...and the Beattie Government was voted in with a record majority. That was nearly two years ago.

**Qld Resources Council: "Economic Straitjacket"**

**Agforce: "Draconian Legislation"**

**Environmental Groups: "pastoralism, fishing, organic agriculture secured for the future without the threat of intensive agriculture such as cotton."**

Combined environmental groups have run a strong campaign to raise awareness of the benefits to the state of the Wild Rivers concept. The Wilderness Society, the Queensland Conservation Council and the Environmental Defenders Office joined resources and took the concept to the people in the Gulf Region with public meetings in Mt Isa, Cloncurry, Julia Creek, Richmond, Georgetown, Normanton and Burketown. Labor backbenchers were flown over the rivers in question and a series of additional meetings held between Brisbane and Cairns to raise awareness within urban populations.

The Queensland Resources Council (QRC) is a non-government organisation representing the interests of companies that have an interest in exploration, mining, minerals processing and en-

ergy production. QRC strongly opposes the Wild River legislation describing it as an "economic straitjacket". In spite of large declared exclusion zones (Aurukun bauxite province and the PNG Pipeline) allowed by Government for important economic developments, the Council's main opposition lies in the fact that unknown mineral deposits may be excluded from development by the new laws.

The AgForce stance on Wild Rivers, and by its own publicity blurb this means the majority of Queensland's pastoralists and broad acre farmers, was predictable. In public AgForce took a back-against-the-wall position refusing to enter any worthwhile debate as to the benefits or otherwise of the Wild Rivers concept and strongly and negatively opposed the idea in media releases all the way to the enactment of the Bill.

On the passing of the legislation AgForce water spokesman Kim Bremner said "Sustainable development in North Queensland has been dealt a severe blow thanks to over zealous State Government legislation designed to appease radical green interests."

Kim Bremner said that "19 North Queensland river systems are now declared as 'wild' – locking them up from communities and banning any future environmentally sustainable development." However the state government and environmental campaigners take an opposite argument. "These special river catchments are now managed for the future and are open to many forms of sustainable development such as pastoralism, ecotourism, fishing and many other sustainable pursuits that are allowed within the legislation. They are however, protected against over-exploitation by water extraction and from pollution from intensive agriculture. It's really a win-all-round situation," says



Larissa Cordner, a Wild Rivers campaigner from the Wilderness Society.

### What is a Wild River?

According to the new Act, a 'wild river' is essentially a river that has all, or most, of its natural values intact.

A 'wild river' has also been described as one that is free flowing – without dams and weirs – allowing for considerable biological diversity. It will have a number of conservation values and is important in the maintenance of a number of basic ecological functions.

The majority of currently proposed wild rivers in Queensland are found in the Gulf of Carpentaria, Cape York Peninsula and the western Channel Country.

### What does the Wild Rivers legislation actually mean?

- The legislation passed to date is the structure under which river systems can be declared as 'Wild Rivers'.
- The Government will now open up the first round of rivers for possible selection. This will mean there will be a moratorium on major infrastructure developments on these rivers for a period not exceeding 12 months, except for special agreement Acts such as the Comalco Act.

- Public consultation and debate will follow.
- Following consultation, the Minister will decide whether to declare, or not declare, the proposed rivers. A Wild River Declaration is a statutory instrument approved by the Governor in Council.
- The rivers expected to come up for declaration are expected to be drawn from the original list of 19 'first rounders', mostly Gulf and Cape rivers: Settlement Creek, Gregory River, Mornington Peninsula, Staaten River, Coleman River, Holroyd River, Archer River, Watson River, Wenlock River, Ducie River, Jardine River, Jacky Jacky Creek, Pascoe River, Olive River, Lockhart River, Stewart River, Jeannie River, Hitchinbrook Island streams and Fraser Island streams.

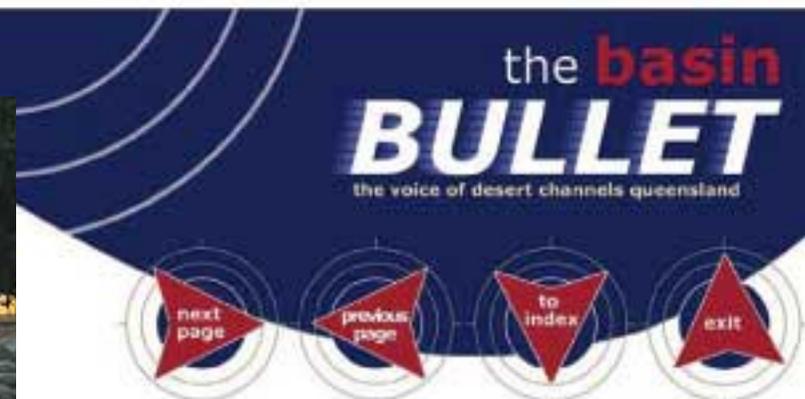
### How will a Wild River Declaration affect Landholders?

The legislation allows for all current developments in a river catchment to be maintained. The future use of water for stock and domestic will be subject to existing rules, and there will be releases of new water for town water supply and other uses such as eco-tourism. The building of large in-stream dams and water impoundments will be prohibited in the high preservation area (the zone surrounding the river and other sensitive areas such as wetlands). Dams and weirs may be permitted in the balance of the catchment provided they gain the necessary approvals. The interference of overland flow will be strictly regulated to protect vital floodplain areas. There are obvious benefits to people living in the catchments of Wild Rivers such as the guarantee of a clean river system, and the maintenance of values that will attract organic primary production and ecotourism. The down side seen by some is the door is shut on irrigated agriculture and large industrial projects.



**Proponents of the Act say existing pastoral operations will not be affected by the Wild Rivers legislation. Floodplain (riparian) grazing will not be affected, maintaining security for Channel Country properties.**

AgForce's Kim Bremner says, "You cannot put up a barrier against future investment based on the views of a small section of the green movement. It is disgraceful and AgForce will lead the fight against this draconian legislation." On the other hand, the Wilderness Society's Larissa Cordner says, "I think people have seen what has happened to the Murray Darling and they don't want it to happen to other river systems. The new Act will enhance development of new tourism and organic industries and maintain existing multi-million dollar industries such as flood plain grazing, and recreational and commercial fishing." It is now up to people living in river catchments that may be proposed for Wild River declaration to decide for themselves and for the generations yet to come.



## A Turbulent Night

Debate on the Wild Rivers Bill started about 4 pm on Wednesday the 28th of September. The lines were drawn, the Labor Party of course supported its own legislation, the Liberal Party had come out publicly in support of the Wild Rivers concept. The Nationals started the debate in total opposition. The debate was long and emotive.

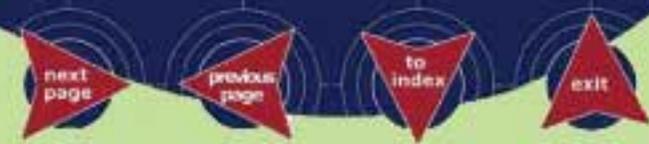
The Wild Rivers Bill was the first that the recently reformed state opposition Coalition had to fight together and one in which the Nats and the Libs had opposing intentions. A trial by fire for the new marriage.

For three hours the debate played out slowly with National MPs eking out their full time allotment in an attempt to bog the debate. A meal break was called around 7pm and a little behind the scene persuasion apparently changed the Nats' modus operandi because after the break, all parties moved quickly through the debate with the Nats changing their game plan. With all arguments voiced, a show of hands was called and at about 9.30 pm the Bill passed into law without a house division being called.

A triumph for the proponents of the Bill and also a triumph for the new Coalition of the Libs (for Wild Rivers) and the Nats (against) who, with some political maturity, accepted their differences and maintained the strength of the Coalition.

## Recipe of the Month:

# Delia's Tomato Relish



An inter-generational recipe hence the imperial measurements.

- 1 lb ripe tomatoes
- 1 lb onions
- 1 cup vinegar
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 flat tablespoon curry powder
- 1 flat tablespoon mustard
- 1 flat tablespoon cooking salt
- Cornflower as required
- Suitable quantity of glass jars (with lids) washed and scalded

Put tomatoes in a large bowl, pour boiling water over them, let sit for a few minutes and then peel.

Chop tomatoes and onions, combine with vinegar, sugar, curry powder, mustard and cooking salt in a large saucepan, bring to the boil and simmer for 10 minutes. Thicken to suit with cornflower, ladle into jars and allow to cool for an hour or so (do not fit lids).

Put in fridge with lids fitted loosely until fully cooled and then tighten lids.

It goes great with cold meat on the plate or between bread. Make more friends by giving a jar or two away but you'll regret it if you cut yourself short.

# STRIKE!

By Nonnie Mouse

**S**assy Morcombe came to Longreach as a young woman, in love with her new husband, Matty – you’ve probably met them if you’ve spent time up this way.

Sassy moved into the family home, a great rambling homestead four generations old. The expectations of her new role were laid on Sassy like a great wet doona, threatening to sink her to her knees and bury her.

Her mother in law, a small spindly woman with a heart of steel and totally filtered of humour, explained the needs of the ‘men’. Breakfasts were important, huge cooked breakfasts of mutton chops, or bacon, or lambs fry or sheep brains scrambled in eggs.

Eager to please in this totally new world, Sassy played the game. Up before daylight every morning; cooking the stinking greasy fry-ups; putting up with her husband, brother-in-law, father-in-law coming to the table with total expectation and early morning grunts and ‘ave y’ got enough barb on the truck?’ – ‘yeah’, and snuffling and slurping into the meal. Never a thank you, just the ongoing expectation of life

as it has always been.

Sassy found it hard, running in the face of her own feminist attitudes and university education. It wasn’t only good coffee she had given up in coming to live with Matty.

The expectations on women were entrenched, chiselled in stone, no questioning was tolerated – not just by the men but by the other women. Over time Sassy began to wonder where the person she used to be had gone.

## **“Lying with Matty unders skies of diamonds set in velvet”**

But there were other sides to this existence that worked more positively on Sassy. Great plains rolling away, horizons bending to the curvature of the earth, huge apricot full moons rising over long waterholes, the living, breathing nature of the river. Lying with Matty under skies of diamonds set on velvet.

And children came and grew, and slowly Sassy was accepted by neighbours and thin threads of common ground were found with other women in the region.

Then came a Country Women’s Association meeting at the little rail siding of Morella, and a little stand for women’s rights.

Actually, it started at a small meeting following the CWA meeting. Eight of the younger station women saw themselves as a breakaway group from the older generation.

As the women moved to the second pot of tea, it was resolved to identify the one pet hate shared by all in the group. Many chores were cited: washing blood-soaked clothes after lamb marking; processing the vast quantity of bloody meat following the butchering of a beast; fighting the fire breathing dragon of the wood-fired Aga stove.

## **“the smell of sizzling mutton fat”**

The women finally agreed the one disliked chore common to all was that of cooking hot breakfasts first thing in the morning – the smell of sizzling mutton fat, the frying of bacon long before the women’s hunger yearnings were woken.

the **basin**  
**BULLET**  
the voice of desert channels queensland

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So it was decided to take the one action that would improve the women's lot. They agreed from one week hence to no longer cook hot breakfasts for their men. After all if shearers could go on strike for better conditions, then surely they could make a stand.

Sassy rose early on that fateful Wednesday morning. The eastern sky was barely stamped with the new day, the honeyeater only a dark and graceful silhouette as it drank from the blossoms of the pom-pom tree outside the kitchen window.

Sassy moved around her kitchen with a certain nervousness, setting the table as might a new wife, unsure of her husband's acceptance of her first meal.

She carefully spread the ironed red check tablecloth, arranged no fewer than five cartons of assorted breakfast cereals in a neat row.

She decanted milk from a plastic two litre container into a large chilled white enamel jug, dropping a fly-proof gauze protector over the curled lips of the jug, the cover's coloured beads tinkling against the enamel as they fell.

She laid a large platter of fruit as a brightly coloured centre piece, and put the electric toaster and a loaf of sliced bread on the end of the table, behind the bulwark of cereal boxes. Jars of honey, vegemite and four different jams lined across the table like marching soldiers. It was perfect.

The woman's nervousness belied her six years of marriage to Matty, the two children they had brought into the world, the fact that she had prepared, cooked and brought more than two thousand breakfasts to this table.

Sassy heard footsteps on the verandah. A shiver went through her, Matty was about to join her for breakfast. He walked in. "Mornin'doll," he said, "where's my scrambled eggs?"

A surprising anger rose in Sassy as the week's tension came to the surface, that a hot breakfast was taken for granted as sure as the sun rising, without consideration of her feelings. She marched from the kitchen, hopped onto the four-wheeler and roared off into what had now become her landscape. She had made her little stand and by doing so had become part of where she lived.

Matty sat bemused among the array of cereal packets; forced to rethink the roles he and his wife played out in this landscape.

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**Feral News: ROCK SNOT!**  
**S**o you think you've got it tough with prickly acacia and parkinsonia, with parthenium peeking over the boundary fence? Spare a thought for our Kiwi cousins who have to deal with this latest challenge to riverine pristinety – rock snot!

Well that's what they call it. It's a type of algae with a scientific name of *Didymosphenia geminata* but in the true Kiwi tradition of calling a weed a weed, they've come up with the descriptive *rock snot*.

With summer quickly approaching and South Island heatwave conditions predicted to soar as high as 12 degrees Celsius, it's going to be hard to keep people out of the rivers.

But in the rivers it lurks, like some horror movie, great globs of this alga looking like ... well I think you get the picture.

Biosecurity NZ says the algae is spreading like a runny nose in the wind and are warning boaties to wash their boats thoroughly before leaving an infected river. Kayaking and speed boat events planned for the South Island waterways are now under question.

There is no answer to the fast spreading floating globs congesting the rivers and the Central Otago White Water Club has placed a self-imposed ban on kayaking in certain rivers. All on the nose really.