

The Murray-Darling Basin – A Crisis in Environmental Management

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This paper will discuss environmental problems in the Murray-Darling Basin river system in Australia and how these problems are being managed. The Government, research organisations and the media are all involved in finding a solution. The paper will describe the communication and media strategies involved.

The Basin covers over one million square kilometres in Australia, extending across one-seventh of the continent. It has a population of nearly two million people, about 10 per cent of Australia's total population. Another million people outside the region depend heavily upon its resources. The Murray-Darling Basin generates about 40 percent of the national income derived from agriculture and grazing. The Basin contains more than twenty rivers as well as important groundwater systems. It is also an important source of fresh water for domestic consumption, agricultural production and industry.

Australia is a dry, flat brown country, and rainfall is limited. People are becoming more aware that water is a precious resource, and that Australia has to find a way to share water between competing demands.

In the Murray-Darling Basin, the demand for water comes from:

1. irrigated agriculture
2. town water supplies
3. the natural environment, including fish, wild life and wetlands

In the last 100 years life in the Murray-Darling Basin has been dramatically changed. Dams and weirs have been built to store water and have interrupted natural river flows and fish breeding programs. Trees have been cut down for agriculture, and have led to problems of salinity and erosion. These actions have led to economic, social and environmental problems. Economically, issues of salinity and declining soil fertility have led to significant losses in agricultural productivity. Socially, regional areas in the Basin are in decline with decreasing populations and people wanting to move to the big cities where there are better services and better jobs. Environmentally, the biodiversity values of the region are under threat from declining and changed flows in rivers, increasing salinity and human impacts.

The Murray-Darling Basin Commission (MDBC) was set up in 1992 to 'to promote and co-ordinate effective planning and management for the equitable, efficient and sustainable use of the water, land and other environmental resources of the Murray-Darling Basin'. It is the largest integrated catchment management program in the world, involving five regional governments and the national Government.

The *Living Murray* strategy is one way the MDBC is managing these problems. This strategy has been widely discussed in the community and the media and has caused a lot of debate. Some people disagree with the *Living Murray* strategy, and do not

believe the scientific evidence about the current environmental health of the Basin's rivers.

The paper will look at three aspects of the MDBC:

- Communication strategy – its development, community involvement and application
- Media strategies – focusing on the example of the *Native Fish Strategy*
- Coverage in the media, and what worked or didn't

The paper will suggest some ways that communication involving scientists, natural resource managers from government agencies and the media could be improved in the future.