

# Blood is thicker, but without water there is no blood!

By - [REDACTED], March 30, 2020

## THE PROBLEM

It is a problem that the Darling River has been stopped by industry from flowing to the West of NSW as it has done for hundreds of thousands, if not millions of years.

It is a problem that a fruit growing farmer who lives on a river where his great-grandfather did, is unable to afford the water flowing past his feet. How can it be right that a foreign share driven company can buy that same water out from under those feet?

It is a problem that first nations people, The Barkindji, who have won the largest Native Title claim in Australian history, find out later, their title does not include the water which should be flowing through the middle of their country. This water is meant to flow down the Darling/Baaka River to Menindee Lakes, a massive natural wetland; a series of great lakes up to seventeen kilometres across. Together Menindee Lakes covers 47,500 hectares (117,000 acres) with water, holding one million, seven hundred and thirty-one thousand megalitres of water (1,731 billion litres or gigalitres). Once home to 120 species of birds from all around the planet, Menindee Lakes are now forcibly drained and dried by the Murray/Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) and are slowly dying under the fierce Western Sun. This situation is heavily affecting all economies and communities along the Darling River, but indigenous communities are especially impacted and challenged.

It is a very real problem that people think economies are more important than ecosystems.

It is especially concerning that successive elected governments have endorsed an entire river system to be stopped from flowing, as if that is right and acceptable; even after The Water Act was created to protect riverine, riparian and significant wetland areas.

*The source or cause of these problems is simple and easy to understand.*

Through the processes of American styled unbridled capitalism, or “private enterprise” the Darling River has been stopped from flowing naturally. This is because governments have sold the water to corporations and industry, and licenced it to be taken out of the riverbed by massive irrigation pumps. And, for the past ten years landholders in Western Queensland and Northern New South Wales have been making illegal earthworks that capture and divert floodplain rain-runoff away from creeks and rivers, into large holding ponds or “ring-tanks”, prohibiting river flows before they can even begin.

These earthworks have only just been made legal by NSW Water Minister Melinda Pavey on February 4, 2020, through - Water Management (General) Amendment (Exemptions for Floodplain Harvesting) Regulation 2020; a rule change in the NSW Water Management Act 2000. This allows the previously illegal works to remain in place, and allows for new works to be made in the future without the requirement of a permit or licence. (Think about that; industry can capture the rain and keep it away from the river, for profit.)

## THE WATER

Life is where the water is. Every living thing we know of has some water inside it; take the water away and the life stops. This is also true for entire bio-regions; after evolving for millions of years to balance ecosystems, vegetation and biodiversity according to where and how much water there is, remove the water and the life stops. Today this is happening in Australia to what is called the Western Division of New South Wales, lands that take up about one third of the state. Basically, all lands west of Cobar and along the full length of the Darling River.

In 2004 Australia commercialised inland water and made much of it into a freehold tradeable commodity through a Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreement. The agreement is called the National Water Initiative (NWI), it was signed and agreed to by every state and territory in Australia, apart from Western Australia.

By separating water-rights or water extraction licences from land titles, it allowed freehold ownership of inland fresh water in Australia. This meant that a person or company holding a water right, (prior to the NWI a right to just use for domestic and farm-use, fresh water taken from a river adjoining their land) now can not only use that water, they can sell it on, for more than they paid for it, because now they legally own that water.

When water entitlements were removed from land title and were allowed to be put into an industrial pipe for sale, the very real affect was to literally deprive the land, ecosystems and aquifers of that life-giving substance that is required by all living things. It made it possible to legally short circuit and “rob” the natural hydrodynamic systems that have been in place since Life on Earth actually began. The motive for this exploit was to simply generate more money and profits for industry.

When water-trading in Australia began, many jumped at the chance to speculate on water sales and the prices that people and companies would pay for water, the very means of production. As the price for water rose many family-farmer operations could not afford the costs and were forced to go into debt to the big banks in order to access the water that flowed right past their land holdings. The banks refused loans to some, making water unavailable and driving them to liquidation. Others were well supported to expand into massive irrigation and water-trading companies, even if the water-traders had no land holdings or were not operating farms.

#### THE IRRIGATORS & THE COTTON

Over the past sixteen years, the privatisation of Australian inland water has had a very bad result for many small farmers and especially for the Barwon/Darling River and Menindee Lakes. The lack of flows to these rivers and lakes is resulting in a bio-geological collapse throughout the entire region.

Cotton, is a crop that can return a very healthy profit if you have the means to get it up, and is very attractive to cashed-up capitalists. To quote Katrina Humphries, mayor of Moree Plains Shire - “I’m not a farmer, I’m a capitalist, and proud of it! I grow cotton to make money!”

The corporatisation of Australian primary production is having profound effects on markets, rural life and the land. Widespread use of chemicals is contributing to huge soil-carbon emissions and a crash in biodiversity. Mechanisation and technology have vastly reduced opportunities for local employment. The cotton, the value adding and the profits mainly go overseas. But without Australian fresh water, nothing!

One thing for sure, most Australian irrigators are not corporate monsters determined to make money by destroying the world. Most irrigators and most cotton growers in Australia are just ordinary farmers; small to medium business operators working at trying to make the best return for their investment.

So, cotton is not really the problem. The problem is firstly, the over allocation of a limited water supply, and secondly, the option for water to be bought and sold and traded to the highest bidder to do whatever. If the best return for a crop was to grow daisies, that is what capitalists like Katrina Humphries would be growing and the water shortage on the Darling River and Menindee Lakes would still be the same.

The problem is clearly that in Australia, water has been separated from the land and has been made into a tradeable commodity. The clear and present danger to our river systems and the ecosystems and the life they support is the commercial trade in water rights.

Only sixteen years have passed since water was commodified in Australia. In that time, we have seen regulations changed to facilitate corporatized industrial interests while ordinary family-based farm operations have been driven out of business by aggressive corporations with big banks in-tow.

Since the National Water Initiative in 2004 the legal extraction rates of irrigation pumps have been greatly increased, so now pumps are able to capture the entire flow of our largest and most important rivers.

## MENINDEE

Corporate lobbyists have managed to convince the federal government and its agencies that water evaporating from the Menindee Lakes is water wasted, and therefore to drain the lakes and keep them dry. Then to transfer that volume of evaporated water to the northern irrigators to be used to make one of the most wasted commodities on Earth, cotton. But this plan fails to recognise that the water vapour, (one gigalitre or one million tons per day according to official MDBA figures) that rises off of Menindee Lakes Daily, is the water that keeps the semi-arid lands of Western NSW alive. Coming down nightly as dew and humidity, keeping plants and animals alive. This one million tons of moisture is mostly blown east-south-easterly towards Wagga Wagga, the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area (MIA) and Victorian Border. If the lakes and the river is dry, it is bound to reduce rainfalls right across these lands.

This stupidity, this barking-mad assumption that the vast ring-tanks in the northern catchment do not evaporate, and the blind notion that the one million tons of water vapour that rises daily off of Menindee Lakes is of no consequence to the semi-arid deserts in the region leaves one staggering in disbelief.

## THE BANKS

Across the planet banks are funding ventures and business plans that will “on paper” describe a profitable investment, having very little to say about its impact on soils, biodiversity, the atmosphere or hydrodynamics of the region or ecosystem. The money is what matters to banks, if the bottom line of the business plan shows a profit, the venture is supported with the required capital. The borrower then is obliged to get cracking and make the plan work and make repayments to the bank according to an agreed schedule. This model or mechanism is responsible for the massive clearing of vegetation from very marginal lands that often fail in financial terms in most years.

Also, is the failure of natural systems on these same lands and is clear to see by anyone who takes a look. Void of shelter and vegetation these lands are massively diminished in wildlife and biota, and are also major contributors to global warming.

In the end it would appear that large banks and the fiscal routines they impose on people and businesses are extremely problematic, and not just in the Darling River Basin.

They impose a schedule or timeframe in which monies and repayments must be made. These schedules have nothing to do with the breath and variations of natural things like the weather, river-flows and droughts. So keen and obliged are the borrowers to repay their “debt”, they will hoard the river-flows, while whole communities downstream suffer terribly, and millions of fish die through the lack of it.

It is this mechanism that is unable to flex with the changing conditions in our weather that is undermining good business ethics and our Habitat. If the banks could hold over or “hold their breath” while conditions for cropping improve, much needed water could go to where it needs to.

## PROGRESS? TOWARD WHAT?

If it is progress to destroy a 3,100-kilometre river system, the question is - Progress towards what?

Is it the biggest dust bowl on Earth? Is it progress towards a continent stripped of biodiversity and life? Is it progress to giant dust storms that will close airports in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane and shorten all of our lives?

What it is, is part of the fiscal fiasco, where people are convinced that money has more value than life on Earth. We must remember, before it is actually too late, that life is not only ours; we share life with all other lifeforms. Life and nature will never, and can never be fully described in fiscal terms; nor will kindness or empathy.

*Blood may be thicker than water, but without water there is no blood.*

There seems a five-pronged spear altering the Darling River Basin ecosystems and communities.

- 1 - Over allocation and extraction of a very limited water supply.
- 2 - A one-eyed profit-obsessive banking system that appears inflexible to global warming, or droughts.
- 3 - Commoditised privately owned inland water being held and owned by aggressive companies and individuals.
- 4 - State and federal governments that think the re-allocation of entire river flows to industry is alright.
- 5 - Global warming or climate change itself, multiplying the biological, geological and social collapse we are seeing today.

*What can we do about the problems?*

- 1 - Stall the Murray/Darling Basin Plan and stop the bulldozer, steel and concrete construction works on the "Maximum Diversion Limit Adjustment Mechanism".
- 2 - Establish a federal royal commission with wide ranging terms of reference and powers to review the effects of water allocations and water-trading over the past thirty years.
- 3 - Declare an emergency regarding the continued drying of the Darling River and Menindee Lakes. Remove all block-weir structures along the lower Darling made during the last Drought. Use emergency powers to create flows to Menindee and re-fill Lakes Wetherell, Pamamaroo, Menindee and Cawndilla to maximum levels and re-establish low-flows along the lower Darling to Wentworth.
- 4 - List all of the Menindee Lakes region under the Ramsar Treaty as a protected wetland for water birds.
- 5 - Engage the public in all matters related to water and ecosystems.
- 6 - Make "Water Studies" a subject in all Australian schools.
- 7 - Create Rights of Nature legislature to protect natural systems and biodiversity in all shires.
- 8 - Fix "The Water Act" to protect inland water from being polluted by industry.
- 9 - Reform the Australian Constitution to reflect and incorporate Rights of Nature values and name ecocide as a crime against our future.
- 10 - Massively subsidise regenerative agriculture wherever it is now starting to take hold.
- 11 - Ultimately the entire Barwon/Darling, downstream from Walgett New South Wales ought to be resumed by the federal government and made into a securely fenced and protected nature and biodiversity corridor, averaging six kilometres across, or enough to enclose the meandering nature of the watercourse.
- 12 - Love each other. Be happy. Breathe, and share life.

Extraction from the Federal Australian Water Act 2007, Section 3, listing the Objects of the thing.

*(Where did we go wrong?)*

### 3 Objects

The objects of this Act are:

- (a) to enable the Commonwealth, in conjunction with the Basin States, to manage the Basin water resources in the national interest; and
- (b) to give effect to relevant international agreements (to the extent to which those agreements are relevant to the use and management of the Basin water resources) and, in particular, to provide for special measures, in accordance with those agreements, to address the threats to the Basin water resources; and
- (c) in giving effect to those agreements, to promote the use and management of the Basin water resources in a way that optimises economic, social and environmental outcomes; and
- (d) without limiting paragraph (b) or (c):
  - (i) to ensure the return to environmentally sustainable levels of extraction for water resources that are overallocated or overused; and
  - (ii) to protect, restore and provide for the ecological values and ecosystem services of the Murray-Darling Basin (taking into account, in particular, the impact that the taking of water has on the watercourses, lakes, wetlands, ground water and water-dependent ecosystems that are part of the Basin water resources and on associated biodiversity); and
  - (iii) subject to subparagraphs (i) and (ii)—to maximise the net economic returns to the Australian community from the use and management of the Basin water resources; and
- (e) to improve water security for all uses of Basin water resources; and
- (f) to ensure that the management of the Basin water resources takes into account the broader management of natural resources in the Murray-Darling Basin; and
- (g) to achieve efficient and cost effective water management and administrative practices in relation to Basin water resources; and
- (h) to provide for the collection, collation, analysis and dissemination of information about:
  - (i) Australia's water resources; and
  - (ii) the use and management of water in Australia.