

What organisation (if relevant) are you from?

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Please enter your first name:

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Please enter your email address:

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To what extent do you agree or disagree with the Panel's key findings and recommendations, and why? Please provide as much detail as possible.

The ██████████ welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Draft Panel Report: Independent Assessment of Social and Economic Conditions in the Basin (Draft Report). ██████████ recognises that constraints that the terms of reference for the inquiry places upon the panel in regard to assessing both the environmental condition and biodiversity benefits that have accrued from the water reforms instigated under the Commonwealth's Water Act and related legislative mechanisms. Key findings In that context we are disappointed that, with the exception of Draft Finding 36, the Draft Report provides little commentary on the positive impacts of the water reform program. Draft Finding 19 argues that local communities are not confident that environmental flows have resulted in a tangible improvement in the quality of their local waterways and associated environments. It is suggested that this lack of confidence results in a corresponding reduction of support for such allocations. ██████████ offers the obvious point that, particularly in the context of ongoing drought exacerbated by climate change, it is unrealistic to expect that environmental flows have been sufficient to restore degraded water dependant ecosystems to a pristine state. Indeed, the challenge goes beyond simply demonstrating environmental improvement over the period of water reform. However, assessment of success cannot be based on whether we have achieved that condition, or even improved on conditions since the commencement of the water reform process, but rather the much more challenging question of whether the system has deteriorated as much as it would have without the allocated environmental flows. Draft Finding 36 paints a more aspirational picture of the relationship between a healthy environment, the welfare and well-being of local communities and economic activity. Although it makes passing reference to national and international obligations around biodiversity conservation, the primary frame of reference is those ecosystem services associated with water quality, water based recreations and tourism activity. Draft finding 37 goes on to express the need for credible research to demonstrate those benefits, especially in relation to the economy of the tourism sector. ██████████ is concerned at the implication that economic activity is the primary means by which the relationship between environmental quality and community well-being is measured. While there is no question that the economic issues are more readily quantified (but see below in regard to more robust assessment methodologies), the benefits to community health and well-being are tangible and

have direct consequences for regional and national economies. Moreover, we note that whether or not we meet our obligations around biodiversity conservation has real consequences for Australia's international reputation as a natural resource manager. Key recommendations Following from the above comments on the measurement of the positive benefits of environmental flows and the appropriate management of environmental assets [REDACTED] agrees with Draft Recommendation 12, namely to conduct further research to demonstrate the clear linkages between healthy ecosystems, community wellbeing and economic performance. We note that high quality research has already been conducted on the economic value of recreational and tourism activity in relation to natural areas in Australia. [REDACTED] commends to the panel the methodology adopted by Heagney et al 2019 in assessing the economic value of tourism and recreation across the NSW network of parks and reserves, see <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0264837718308615>. This approach has clear parallels with areas of high environmental value across the Murray Darling Basin, and indeed their analysis includes all of the gazetted reserves in the NSW portion of the basin. Earlier analyses of the economic value of tourism and recreational activity relating to natural assets are available at: <https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/-/media/OEH/Corporate-Site/Documents/Research/Our-science-and-research/economic-benefits-national-parks-other-reserves-nsw-summary-report-090066.pdf?la=en&hash=A915B5CF7871C55DBEBF5D04C4A3883FF8BE29B0> <https://sustain.pata.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/100047-Tech-Report-Econ-Value-Tourism-to-National-Parks-WEB.pdf> [REDACTED] notes that these assessment methodologies all share the same limitation in that they are focused on tourism and recreational activities. We would argue that, particularly in the case of water and water dependant ecosystems, a much broader analysis is required, encompassing the economic values associated with ground water recharge, soil moisture, water pollution, infiltration through retained vegetation, biodiversity hot spots, centres of endemism, health, education and cultural connection amongst other variables [REDACTED] endorses the proposal under Draft Recommendation 10 for First Nations groups to engage with experts to value the ecosystem services of Ramsar sites and other culturally significant places. However, we would recommend that this initiative be extended to all areas of high environmental value across the basin.