



project in progress summary

knowledge for managing Australian landscapes

Federalism and natural resource management in the Murray Darling Basin

Research project number ANU36 of the Social and Institutional Research Program of Land & Water Australia. Commencement date: 2002; Anticipated completion: November 2005.

Background

The thesis is a politico-historical study of attempted cultural and institutional adaptation to the changing bio-physical circumstances of the Murray-Darling Basin (MDB).

Themes to be discussed include:

- The influence of the Australian federal system on governments - Commonwealth, state and territory - forced by necessity to cooperate in the MDB.
- The struggle over the past 150 years, between contending sections of society wanting to shape the changing conceptual and moral framework that has defined what is desirable, realistic, reasonable and possible in the MDB.
- Institutional impacts on and responses to environmental change.

- The capacity of established institutions in the MDB, given their history, to deal with sustainability issues including the prospect of climate change.

A consistent theme is the need to 'interpret against the grain': most participants now accept that their work on matters dealing with water causes considerable controversy but they still see themselves as 'non-political'. This is a particularly strong feature of the older literature, which reflects the firm belief of its creators that their work was technical, scientific, professional, objective and culturally neutral.

Objectives

The thesis will contribute to the growing discussion about how to achieve systemic change to a more sustainable system of natural resources management in the Murray-Darling Basin. More specifically the intention is to increase awareness



of the way institutions in the Basin have evolved over time in response to declining environmental circumstances and changing ideas about the appropriate role of governments.

Approach to the project

The thesis will be part of the growing humanities/ social science discourse dealing with the relationship between human society and the larger natural system. It will draw heavily on the biological and hydrological research that is a major influence on the contemporary debate about the future of river management. Sources will include document archives, research literature, publications from governments, industry and interest groups, newspapers and personal papers.

Preliminary findings

Federation in 1901 fundamentally changed the political dynamics between the Australian states. The creation of an overarching political system has made it very difficult for any one state in the MDB to go it alone; the potential for other states to block such plans is now much greater than before. However, while the federal system has prevented some of the more dire beggar-my-neighbour development options from coming to fruition it has not been able to manage growing conflicts between economic development and the need for environmental sustainability.

The extreme variability of the flow patterns of the Basin's rivers from year to year, caused the original designers of the river management system to base its water sharing processes on proportions of available flow, rather than rights to specified volumes as is the case in most major multi-jurisdictional river systems elsewhere in the world. Just as the potential of this climate-sensitive approach for adaptive environmental management is gaining recognition, however, it is coming under increasing threat from powerful irrigation groups wanting to lock in their current access to water despite the constraints of an over-committed river system.

An underlying theme in the recent history of the MDB, unifying a diverse array of government programs, agricultural activities and public debates, has been efforts to respond to salinity problems in light of the new understanding of the saline groundwater systems gained during the last 20 to 30 years. This new knowledge has called into question the future of many established farming practices and the adequacy of existing institutional processes for Basin-wide water management. It is also notable that other environmental problems in addition to salinity have not yet attracted a similar level of commitment to their solution or management.

Contact

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