

Who is KILLING THE DARLING RIVER?

Or

Why has the Murray-Darling Basin Plan Failed?

by Ron Pike

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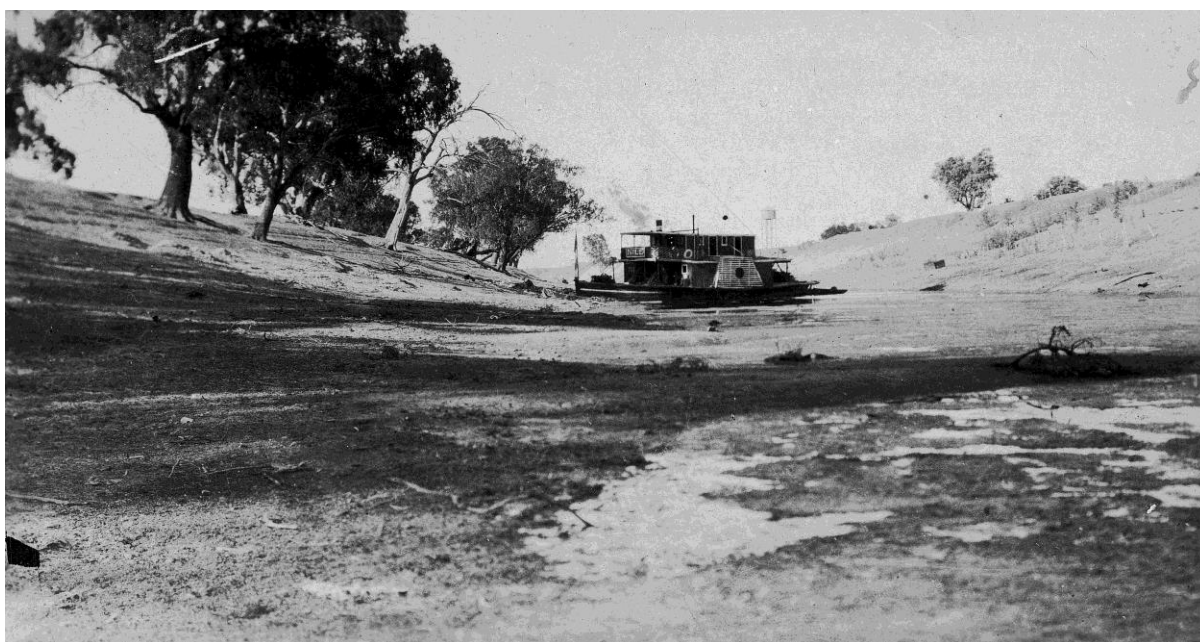
As we watch the disturbing daily images of the dry Darling River, parched Menindee Lakes, millions of dead fish, and outback towns without drinkable water, both bush and city are screaming - Why?

“Who is responsible” they ask? “Name the scapegoats and brand them criminals!” is demanded.

Any lesser response would be shameful, but some reactions, while understandable, are not rational.

Before we look more closely at why and how these unacceptable events have occurred, we need to put to rest some misconceptions about this river and recent claims made by some aboriginal people that the Darling was previously a “Mighty River” that always flowed.

It wasn't. After discovery by English explorers Stuart and Hume in 1828, history kept at Menindee tells us it was bone dry there at least 48 times up to 1960 - something that no doubt also happened for hundreds of years before.



The paddle steamer NILE on the dry bed of the Darling River, near Bourke, about 1898.

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It has only been since the commissioning of several dams on the tributaries of the Darling and the off-river Menindee Lakes storage in 1968 that the river has been kept flowing and successfully supplying fresh water to users along its great length. That was until recently when the system went from several flood events to the present parched disaster in a very short time.

The media have been plastered with sensationalist stories accusing “Scapegoats” of water theft, political corruption, calls for closing down Cubbie Station, charging and jailing cotton growers and of course claims of collusion between corporate agriculture and Politicians, even accusing some of them of being responsible for the drought.

These cries are repeated with ever increasing passion and are garnering sympathy from city cousins, but they are mostly incorrect. But while the people are short of water we are awash with political opportunism (laced with hypocrisy) from those who promoted the policies which caused these problems. They now blame others and try to pose as saviours (mostly of their political skin).

As someone who has been a passionate fisherman of the western rivers, including the Darling for over 70 years, I can attest that the Water Minister’s claim that such fish kills are “normal” is a lie. Some of the large Murray Cod pictured are 50 plus years old and have survived many droughts. While the exact cause has not been determined I believe it is lack of oxygen caused by nil flow and the growth of blue-green algae also due to nil flow. Claims by the Minister and his Department that fish kills elsewhere are widespread are more beat up than fact.

So if the scapegoats listed above are not responsible for this unacceptable situation then what is?



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Management of the system changed markedly when the Turnbull-inspired Murray-Darling Basin Plan was introduced with details that most don't appreciate.

The first was that ownership of volumetric licenses to irrigate was removed from land that could be irrigated. These licenses were then available for purchase by green bureaucracies, speculators and investors. Irresponsibly these licenses could then be bought and moved from one valley to another.

Secondly, the NSW Government exacted from irrigators 15% of their licensed volumes and vested this water with the Department of Heritage and Environment. Other Government agencies and indigenous groups were also allocated water.

The result has been that the stored water previously prudently kept to keep the rivers running and supplying basic needs in dry times has been squandered to the sea under the guise of *Environmental flows, translucent flows, heritage flows, and indigenous water*.

The prime example is the twice near-draining of Menindee Lakes for the dishonest purpose of flushing the lower Murray. This was a flagrant waste of water. It is the reason Broken Hill ran out of water and is now reliant on a \$500 million pipeline from the Murray.

The call for more intense monitoring and extra staff is not necessary as monitoring staff have for years outnumbered end users by a large factor. All that is necessary is that they do their job properly. Why can't the minister manage this?

The problems caused by over regulation of our river system, presently vividly apparent on the Darling are in fact spreading south and if not addressed will likely see the whole Basin out of water by this time next year.

Not only is the Darling being killed, our food bowl and regional communities are bleeding to death because of the counterproductive MDB Plan.

While Politicians and Governments lack the humility to recognise that the present situation is caused by their legislated, overlapping bureaucratic regulatory mess that is delivering bad outcomes, then Henry Lawson's prediction rings loud:

*“And the land grows old and the people never
Will see the worth of the Darling River.”*

Ron Pike.

About Ron Pike:

*It was on the dry plains of the Riverina that Ron's Grand-Parents settled in the early 1900's and some of Ron's earliest memories are of fishing on the Murrumbidgee and gaining knowledge around a campfire listening to a Grandfather telling how settlers had transformed what explorers, Stuart and Cunningham described as, “**a dry treeless plains unsuitable for human habitation,**” into productive land capable of feeding a growing Nation.*

Ron grew up on his Dad's rice farm at Murrumbidgee and his earliest memories are of learning how to fish the western rivers and of propagating trees and understanding the need to improve the landscape from a Dad who deeply understood and appreciated every aspect of the land of which he was caretaker. Today he would be called an environmentalist; a word Ron does not remember being used back then.

Ron's knowledge and understanding of the rivers of the MDB is the result of a lifetime spent on these streams, fishing, boating and using the waters for irrigated agriculture. Maintenance of a healthy ecology on these streams, taught by his Father, is central to everything that Ron advocates.

Ron was one of the first farmers to take up land at Coleambally Irrigation Area and in 1961 was officially the first farmer to use water from the Snowy Scheme when water was turned onto Farm 1 Coleambally.

With the increasing volumes of water then available, Ron began developing irrigated agricultural land on what were grazing properties along the Murrumbidgee Valley and the Yanco Creek. It was work he continued until he retired. All of Ron's developments included man-made wetlands as part of the irrigation system.

Ron has always been actively involved in political policy development.

His lifetime aim is to see Australia drought proofed with abundant water and power for all for the foreseeable future.

Now recognised as an expert on water and dams, particularly the Murray Darling Basin Rivers, Ron has provided expert advice on water conservation, dams and irrigation to several Government enquires and continues to do so.

“The food we eat the water we drink and the power we use for most of our endeavours, are available only because previous generations invested their know-how and money for the future.

It is time this generation did the same.”