

FOUR BEAUTIFUL SEASONS TWELVE FANTASTIC MONTHS ONE VERY BIG YEAR

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CAMERON MUIR: FEEDING THE WORLD

This is the text of an address delivered by Cameron Muir (Australian National University) at the second of three *One River Symposia*, presented under the banner of *Critical Undercurrents*. This session was held in Mildura on Sat 16 March 2013 as part of the Mildura Wentworth Arts Festival.

Malcolm asked us to introduce ourselves by talking a little about our personal relationship with a river in the Basin. I grew up on the Macquarie River, near Dubbo, in the northern part of the Basin – drinking its water, floating down its meanders in summer. My father would take us exploring on the weekends through that country and I've continued that in my historical research and in driving around and talking to landholders.



I thought I should tell you a little about the northern basin. The rivers don't run to the sea – they terminate inland, creating delta-like wetlands, or when there's enough water they run to the Barwon and Darling Rivers. Their flows are more variable than in the south, and it's drier.

One River is a Centenary of Canberra project, proudly supported by the ACT Government and the Australian Government.

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There used to be a fairly big citrus industry, although not as big as here at Mildura. Its heyday is over. Mostly irrigation is for cotton, dominated by Auscott and Swires.



It's a region characterised by excellent rail infrastructure;



shopping;



nice hotels;



beautiful wetlands;



great sporting facilities (this is a cricket pitch);



housing;



and we take care our lawns – although water restrictions can make it a bit tricky.]



I'm ending with this photo because for me it says a lot about the history of this area.



This property is named after an Aboriginal stone arrangement here.



You can see it in the bottom right corner, twenty stones in a row. The other photos are of stone arrangements on top of an ancient granite outcrop, called Mt Foster, adjacent to the twenty stone paddock. This is a rare rise on the plain, and one of the few sources of rock. Aboriginal people quarried it for axe heads, flaked stone, and for seed grinding. This was seed country long before Europeans came. All this country was important to Aboriginal people. Here are Aboriginal people at the nearby Marshes, preparing for a Bora ceremony:



In the late 1830s, stockmen began pushing into the Aboriginal lands of the northern Basin. A bloody battle for water began. Not far from here, in 1841, Aboriginal people cracked the skulls of three stockmen with clubs and axes. It was drought, and the stockmen had tried to take the last waterhole for 70 miles around. A fortnight later a band of troopers and stockmen retaliated. They rode out and fired at a family of Aboriginal people, and slashed and sabred the wounded, killing twelve. Here at Mt Foster Aboriginal people launched attacks on stockmen trying to take the Macquarie River channels. In September 1845 troopers fired on the group and killed ten. Two days later they found Cudgenmoly, the leader of the Bogan River people, and shot him six times before he fell. By the 1860s the squatters had won all the riverways.

By the 1950s stations like Twenty Stone were receiving world record prices for their Merino wool and stud rams. But the pastoralists were worried. The Labor government had begun work on a dam at the Macquarie's headwaters. The pastoralists opposed it from the start, but they lost, and by the 1990s, when cotton really took off, there was a deep divide between graziers and irrigators. This is a different story to Mildura. In the northern basin irrigation came much later. Some of the famous sheep stations – like Twenty Stone – were taken over by irrigation companies. Graziers feel cotton growers usurped their power – and their water. Communities had to find a way to survive in spite of irrigation.

So you can see... we've been arguing over water for a long time. I grew up surrounded by all this conflict. I saw townsfolk scared of toxic chemicals, I saw the reaction to the Mabo and Wik legislation, I saw towns with simmering racial tensions, and I loved a river that in some years we couldn't swim in because of blue green algae, or too much faeces in it. I thought all this had to be related, all this had to come from somewhere, and that's how I became interested in history.

For today's symposium I've been asked to talk about one slice of history, about a myth that has emerged from Australia's history as a food exporter, and from our dreams for what the inland could become. This myth is the idea that Australia should, or could, or does 'feed the world'. It's being used at the moment to try to shut down debate. When the Federal government started talking about water buybacks, the Nationals Leader said, 'We cannot keep taking properties out of production and expect to meet our obligations to provide food to the world.' Barnaby Joyce said we're choosing the happiness of frogs and ducks over the starving millions in Africa. I've spent a lot of time talking with irrigators, and met very nice people, and when I've written their stories I've empathised with their circumstances and hardships. But the lobbyists are different – rural politicians and lobbyists have served them poorly. The Ricegrowers Association used the "feeding the world" slogan to say if you support reform of river management and water allocation then you are immoral, you are making people starve. The Ricegrowers Association said they produce enough rice to feed 40 million people 365 days a year.

Our Australian Rice Industry
Growing Rice to Feed the World

Our Australian Rice Facts

Up to 40 million people eat Australian rice around the world each day.

Australia around 8

Rice is the

Sun RICE
The Rice Food Experts

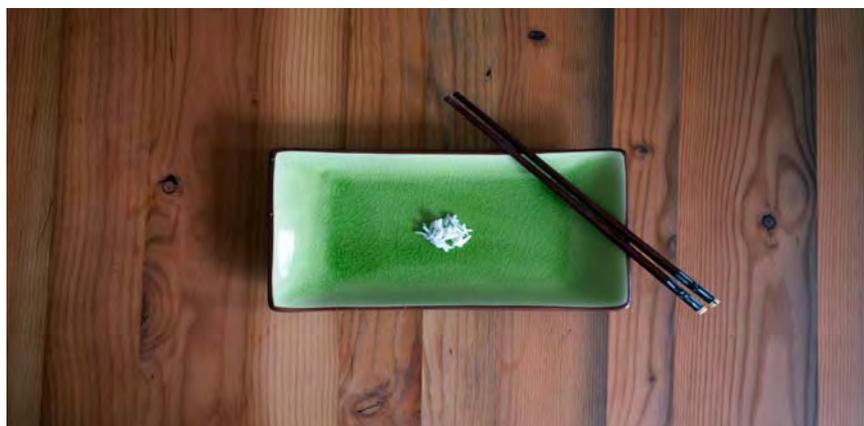
Fact Sheet

Rice and the Economy

Rice was first grown in Australia in the early 1920's - near the townships of Leeton and Griffith in the New South Wales Riverina. Today the rice industry contributes to supporting 63 regional towns, all of which are located in the temperate climate of southern NSW and North Eastern Victoria. There are approximately 2,000 farms eligible to grow rice in Australia producing around 1 million tonnes of rice each year. Most rice farms are owned and operated by Australian families. The rice is grown, processed and packaged in regional towns, providing over 6,000 jobs.

- **Australian rice feeds up to 40 million people daily.**
Rice production is one of the most important agricultural activities on the planet as more than half the people in the world eat rice at least once a day. Australia produces enough rice to feed almost 40 million people one meal a day, every day.

But take a season such as 2007/8, when allocations were cut and ricegrowers decided they could make more money selling their water than growing rice. Divide that harvest by 40 million meals, for 365 days. This is the size of the meal, uncooked:



Australia's rice production in a good year is less than a 1 percent of global production. Ricegrowers make a great product and achieve amazing yields, but they don't feed the world. Saying they do is a PR strategy, but it undermines their real achievements. They already have a good story, they don't need this one.

The idea of Australia shipping off bountiful harvests to feed the world is a myth. Australia produces about 1.3 per cent of the world's grains, and about 1.4 percent of the world's meat. Fruit and vegetables are about 0.3 percent, and rice around 0.6. These statistics have been consistent for the last thirty or so years. And we target niche markets, with premium products, for the wealthy and middle classes – because we have to.

This is a system in which Australian farmers have to compete in the market against subsidised commodities from Europe and the USA. A system in which high food prices are bad for nations with large urban populations, such as Nigeria, but what many people don't realise, is that two thirds of the world's poorest and hungry people, are farmers. So when low-priced produce from Europe and the USA gets dumped there the local farmers can't compete. But it gets more complicated. There's research which argues that when you take away subsidies, it can put pressure on farmers to try to extract more from their land, causing environmental damage.

Our – humanity's – agricultural activities have been the primary cause of species loss, and continues to be 'perhaps the single greatest threat to biodiversity'. Agriculture has played a significant role in plunging the earth into another mass extinction event, the sixth in its history. The way we do agriculture will determine the fate of our species. How do we do work with the environment without threatening life on earth? How do we do re-integrate agriculture, and our food production, back into ecology? How do we form alliances between the two most important groups in the system – the people who grow the food, and the people who eat it? How do we make farmers feel valued again? What will make urban people care about farmers again?

We can't re-imagine a fairer system if we're talking in moral slogans and political point scoring. We need an open and frank conversation that acknowledges our shared, lumpy histories, the good and the bad. Rather than competing voices, a real conversation will build a foundation upon which we can then talk about the kind of future we want for ourselves, and for the environment on which we depend.