

# FOUR BEAUTIFUL SEASONS TWELVE FANTASTIC MONTHS ONE VERY BIG YEAR



DI DAVIDSON

**This is the text of an address delivered by Di Davidson (horticulturalist, agriculturalist and Member of the Murray Darling Basin Authority) 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**

Thanks indeed for the invitation to be part of the symposium today. I have been connected to the Murray Darling Basin all my life. On any given day I might be wearing several different hats in a professional sense, but the underlying reality is that the Basin and the rivers that run through it are an integral part of my life. In fact, I've spent the last forty years travelling and working from one end of the Basin to the other. I was born and grew up and still farm the land that my family settled in 1850 near the Lower Lakes in South Australia, 5km from the shore of Lake Alexandrina. Beyond my own family story, I have canoe trees in my vineyard and in paddocks which bear evidence of the long occupation of this same land by the Ngarrindjeri people. Some of these people are still very much part of our daily lives in the area where I live and work, so I am always aware of the links between the past and the present.

The years I have spent working in the Basin have been nearly all in various agricultural pursuits. I've spent quite a lot of time in this area, Sunraysia, as well as all along the Murray River to Albury as well as in the northern parts of the Basin around St George. This has been very useful background for me in my role as a Member of the Murray Darling Basin Authority. Most particularly, it really helped me focus on the balance we needed to find with the recently released Basin Plan.

There have been many comments about the process by which the Plan has developed. There has been only one Murray Darling Basin Plan and that's the one we have now, the first ever in over 100 years of water management. Designing the Plan has taken over 4 years, because it takes a long time to get it right, and even now we still only have a framework, not the final detail. As you know, the Plan itself will not be implemented until 2019, so we have seven more years to get the detail right. It has been essential to develop a Plan for the Basin and I don't think anyone would argue with that. People have argued about many things but not the fact that a Plan was necessary because, as has been said already this afternoon, this is a large area of the country. The Basin covers a million square kilometres, or 14% of Australia. It's home to some 10% of our population and it contains 42% of our farms. All of these are significant statistics so we must plan and care for the Basin to ensure its sustainability.

Getting the balance right without a Plan has been difficult in the past, partly because of our traditional approach to agriculture that has prevailed since settlement, and certainly since Federation in 1901 and the River Murray Waters Agreement in 1915. There have been 100 years of traditional agriculture, intensively focused on productivity and output, industrially based with 'more' and 'better' and 'bigger' being the main aim. This really isn't sustainable in the long term, and hence the need for the Plan. If we consider the national reform agenda in Australia, water reform has been a constant issue throughout the last 30 years particularly, and it's not an exaggeration to say that the Plan is the most significant piece of water and natural resource reform ever achieved in Australia. However the challenge has been to encompass effectively a triple bottom line result. Certainly, restoring water to the environment has been

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absolutely essential. But the need to maintain the social and economic health of our farming-based communities is equally important.

I have spent a lot of time working with farming families and businesses, both large and small, and I am certainly smack bang in the middle of my own farming family operations at the present time. And I have spent much time working with people who have invested in our agriculture sector, and thereby have invested in our communities. Not all investors come from the 'big smoke' – many of them are individuals and businesses based in towns throughout the Basin.

What this experience has shown me is that people need each other and community support. I think one of our weaknesses as Australian farmers is that we have not always shared our lives and our knowledge nearly enough, although this is changing. We have tended to isolate and fence ourselves in a little bit. Even this morning, I was with a group of farmers out at Merbein where we discussed various issues; it was the first time some of them had really openly shared their views and experience in relation to some of the challenges which they're confronting. I think that the future must be about collaboration and sharing and co-operation. The future for communities is based on really helping each other and changing the tendency we have to say, "Look, it's my affair, leave me alone with it".

I have been asked to talk about farmers and some of the things that they might do differently. The reality is that farmers and farming families are forced to make many simultaneous difficult decisions. And, of course, they are very much at the mercy of the elements; farming is a tough and complicated business and individuals' different attitudes to risk mean that there is a range of outcomes. Strategic plans and operational decisions must be made, but not all will succeed. I presume some of you in the audience are farming and you'll know that the choice may well seem to come down to whether you can remain on the land without getting bigger. "Get big or get out." I can remember that phrase when I was studying agricultural science way back before the Apollo 11 lunar landing! "Get big or get out," was a common phrase even back then, and to a degree it still applies.

Ross Lake has talked this afternoon about the need to create "soft landings" for irrigators and farmers within a changing water regime. This is an important consideration, but it could be that the best soft landing for some farmers might still be outside of the industry. Yesterday I was out at Robinvale, and the people I met with there made me think, again, about the opportunities a farmer really has to change direction. There is nothing as constant as change, and farmers are necessarily some of the most adaptive people in the nation. They cope from day to day with all manner of unknowns and few farmers go to bed at night not having encountered some sort of unplanned development during the day

It's true that small changes can make a big difference, and this is something that particularly applies if we free our thinking. I come back to the view held by some Australian farmers who, historically, may have argued that: "We are what we are and we are here and this is the way we do things ". But in reality we are all challenged to make changes and take risks; we can't always have a safety net. New and different markets for produce are opening up from time to time and some will exploit those small opportunities in new or niche markets. I have mentioned the need for collaboration with others, even if this is just sharing equipment. It may also mean pooling financial and personnel resources and opening up the mind: "What I am doing is tough, I'd like to look at some other options." It's about being open to new ideas and perhaps being braver in taking some calculated risks. I know of course that all of this is easy to say and often very hard to achieve! But the reality for some people is that they need to embrace this kind of mindset because it will be very hard for them to simply carry on as they are.

The bigger changes are often very hard changes. But they don't necessarily have hard landings. One of these is to sell all or part of the property/business to someone who wishes to put equity into it. The new financial resourcing may

make property more productive and allow it to be managed in a way where the natural resources are properly cared for and not unduly exploited.

So, in some instances, maybe we could sell up and move out. We don't have a God given right to a lifestyle as a farmer, although some people think they do. In my experience, most people who move on from farming do find something else to do which equally enriches their lives. The average age of farmers in the Basin according to ABS statistics at the moment is about 65 years, despite the young people working in the industry. This is an alarming statistic. But, if we help them, some of those older people can actually move into another place or space, but not necessarily out of their community at all. I know people who have discovered whole new lives in mentoring younger people, working with community, discovering things in their community that they never knew existed because they were working so hard on the block or the farm. Once again, of course, I appreciate that this is easy for me to say and hard, but I stress not impossible, to actually achieve.

It can certainly become easier if the community, over time, makes this transition together. We all need to accept the Basin Plan as a framework for the future as it will affect all of us who live and work in the Basin for the rest of our lives. Over the next seven years we have many community meetings planned so that the Authority can gather as much input from different groups and stakeholders as possible, whether it's about environmental, engineering, social or economic issues. Through these meetings over the next few years we aim to reach a point where we enable change. It's fair to say that the adjustment will be felt differently across the Basin. Some of the smaller towns with a more narrow economic base will probably struggle, but communities with a broader economic base will continue to grow and develop as there is more certainty regarding regulated water availability. The bigger and perhaps better-educated individuals and farm businesses that are a reasonable size will adjust. There will be some which can't adjust and we will all need to assist them. "We" – who is this "we"? It shouldn't just be the government. Government will certainly have a role to play, but as a society and as members of our own communities we have a collective responsibility to assist as we can those who may need to make radical adjustments. It is my belief that this is where real community effort will come into play.

In concluding, I'd like us all to reflect on the fact that we do live and work in a river Basin which only operates due to the man-made structures and interventions within it. The diagram below shows how many structures we have in the river system. We no longer have the river of 1914. In order that we could have productive agriculture, so that we could populate inland Australia (including semi arid regions!) we now have something like 52 structures across, in and around our rivers, including locks and weirs, several dams, and barrages. It is something we forget at our peril; we still have to work within this man-made system. But it's a good reminder of just how big our footprint is within and across the entire Basin and why we need a Basin Plan to ensure that it remains a healthy, working Basin with a resilient environment and strong communities.



# River operations

