

Kim Chalmers: *One River* Symposium Address

This is the text of an address given by *One River* Reference Group member, Kim Chalmers, at the final of three *One River* Symposia, presented under the banner of *Critical Undercurrents*. This session was held in the Visions Theatre at the National Museum of Australia on Sunday 25 August, 2013, in partnerships with the People and Environment Program of the NMA.

25 August 2013, National Museum of Australia.

I'm from the area around Mildura, and I grew up in that part of the world which is just downstream of where the 'Bidgee meets the Murray. It's a really beautiful part of the world. I'm going to tell you a little bit about what I do. I guess my talk is really focused around the concept that being an environmentalist and an irrigator are not necessarily two separate things. There's a lot of talk about how those two roles are so opposite to one another, but I'm standing here today to tell you that, actually, they're not.



This is the Peacock Creek which runs in flood times from the 'Bidgee through to the Murray. It used to be an old course of the 'Bidgee before it found a shorter route many thousands of years ago, and this ran through my family property. My grandfather established a broadacre farming property there on the Murray on the New South Wales side of the border near Lake Benanee many, many years ago. In the 1940s and 1950s he actually approached the establishment of that farm in a very environmentally responsible way, particularly by the standards of that time. There's real and deep respect for nature in my family. My grandfather cleared his section of the Mallee in such a way so as to leave green corridors everywhere for native wildlife and flora to maintain its presence despite the farming, and he rotated his crops in a responsible way so as to maintain the integrity of the soil. My father then carried on the same kind of

approach.

Growing up in this environment has inspired me in a number of ways. One of those is in my art, and here is a photograph from a project I did with Sally Hendricks, who is my collaborator on the *One River* project. You can see here how the landscape of the river environment is so intricately tied in with what I do, and the music that I create is always inspired from the region.



Here's a little picture of the past. This was obviously a part of the broadacre farming and grazing history of the property where my family grew up. This is an old shearing hut quarters that was located on the Peacock Creek. That's when the creek used to flood before the dams and locks were put in and paddle steamers were used to transport things up and down.



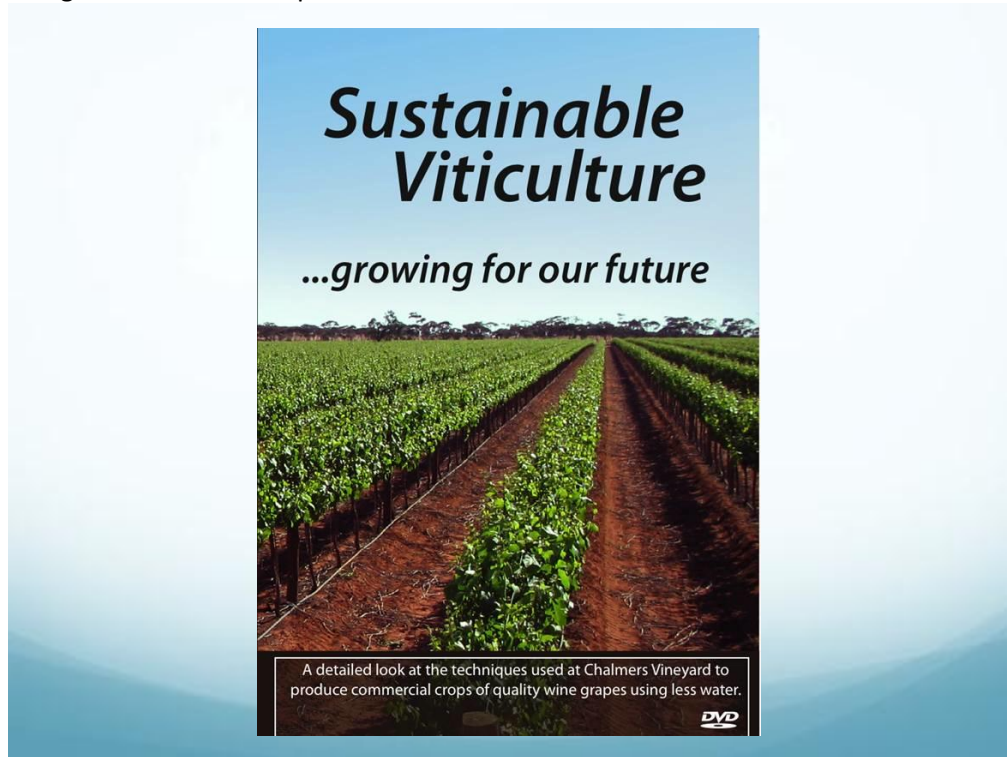
Moving on from that broadacre history, my father started viticulture and irrigated horticulture on a corner of the property in the 1980s. As you can see, our vineyard is a bit different from a lot of vineyards that you see in the area in that it is full of trees. The tractor drivers hate it because they have to go around them all the time. But all those green corridors that were originally left there by my grandfather when he cleared it for broad acre farming have been left there for viticulture as well. It's a technique that we use to also keep our chemical use down, because having all those native birds and things there keep the insects away and we don't have to use pesticides on our crops. So keeping the land healthy indeed does keep the people healthy, and it keeps business healthy as well.



Over the years of working like this in our vineyards we've developed a whole method of sustainable viticulture where we're using less water and we're using less chemicals but we're producing crops that are commercially viable. The word 'irrigator' is a bit of a dirty word at times when you're talking about the environment, but we've developed methods to be able to reduce our water use by up to about half. We're growing grapes with about half the amount of water that most other people in our district are using.

I think the need to have more water for our environment is absolutely essential. I'm not

anti-Basin plan; I'm pro-Basin plan. I think that water for rivers, water for communities, water for the environment is absolutely paramount, but that does not necessarily mean that irrigated business can't exist. This is the cover of a DVD that we produced ourselves. I wrote the script. It was partially funded by the federal government and was actually distributed out to irrigated grape growers right across the Murray-Darling Basin free of charge. Thousands of copies went out.



A lot of people contacted us after we sent this around saying, 'Thank you so much, we've done things you talked about in this video in our farms and we've managed to save X amount of water.' It's not only about what you do in your own back yard, it's about how you share that knowledge across the Basin to make everybody stand up and listen and realise that they can become more sustainable and that less water doesn't necessarily have to be a bad thing.

Moving on from that farm that was my family property, we sold that property in 2008 and we've established two smaller vineyards now. My sister and I are heavily involved in the family business too, so we're the third generation on the land here. Our two new sites are also irrigated vineyards.



This one is in the northern part of Heathcote, near Rochester. It's irrigated from the Murray Goulburn system. As you can see, we've also got plenty of native trees in our vineyard there. It's in an area that has traditionally been grazing and cropping country. And we've established a new small vineyard in Merbein. It was interesting to see the picture in Daniel Connell's talk of the Chaffey era 'propaganda'. Merbein was a product of that Chaffey era of development. It was certainly an ambitious plan at the time but it has created a community where people love to live.

We heard from Daniel earlier that what makes places like Mildura great is more than just irrigation. It is also the lifestyle that comes from living in a beautiful place like this and being able to be a working artist living there. But, sadly, we all know that there was a major shortage of irrigation water during the recent millennium drought. This caused major change in places like Merbein where families that had been farming for a long time have had to look for other streams of income. There are lots of dead vineyards and irrigation blocks. There are hard times, and it's not an easy thing to navigate - we all know that.

We've tried to really focus on the positives and see these challenges as opportunities. Apart from employing more sustainable practices through reducing our water requirement and reducing the chemicals we're using, which is all good stuff, we've also invested a lot of research into finding out what grapes actually grow best in these hot areas. We all got a bit excited in the 1970s and 1980s and decided to plant all the French varieties of grapes everywhere because that's what was popular at the time. But, actually, if you think about it places like Mildura are hot and dry and they're much more similar to Spain or Sicily than they are to Bordeaux or Burgundy. Over the last 10 -15 years my family has done a lot of research and development and we actually imported about 70 new grape varieties into the country with a real focus on grapevines that actually love the hot, dry conditions. Basically, these Sicilian and southern Italian varieties are able to grow and thrive in conditions where other grape varieties perhaps don't and where you need to obviously treat them very differently.

We've spent the last ten years working out which ones do best and making wines from those, and then going out and telling our story to the country, one to one. My sister and I sell the wines ourselves. We go into the bars and restaurants in Melbourne. These are fancy restaurants that are well awarded and well reviewed. People are in there spending their hard-earned money every weekend, and they want to hear our story.

They want to know that we are using less water. They want to know that we are growing varieties that suit the country better. Our brand is built on that. It's a good news story.

There are other people that are also investing time and money into these varieties now. In the 15 years since we started doing it, a number of varieties of grapes that we grow are now being grown commercially all over warm inland Australia - and not only by small operators like us but by the big companies that actually guide how the world perceives Australian wine, like Treasury Wine Estates and brands like Jacob's Creek.



This is just an example of one of the Italian varieties we grow. Places like Merbein, Sunraysia, the Riverina and the Riverland have always been seen as a factory-style grape producers, with big crops and lots of water and lots of grapes and a lot of cheap product. I read the other day that the average value of wine exported from Australia is around \$1 per litre. If you think about what goes into that dollar, the water, the manpower and all those people that have to make a living from that product then clearly that price is unsustainable. What we want to do is improve the value of this product. We have put a lot of effort and time and a lot of natural resources into making the wine that we make, so we want people to respect that.



We've done projects like this little project that we like to affectionately call the 'bucket wine project.' This year we made about 40 different very small batches of handmade wine. When I say 'handmade', there were no chemicals, there were no instruments, we had no lab equipment and we used a bucket, a sieve, a jug, a few beer bottles, a crown sealer and a texta to write on the bottles. We actually drove down to Melbourne with all this wine in our car and we had a sale in a restaurant there where we invited a very short list of the top restaurants and wine bars around Melbourne to come and see what we'd done. We had made these wines from grape varieties that love the sun in a region that is not specifically well known for premium wine but we put a lot of love in and we wanted to show people you can create really beautiful, unique things with less inputs. In 17 minutes we sold every single bottle of wine that we took down there.



People want to hear the story. They want to know what we're up to. This is just an example of a little piece of press that we got in Brisbane about those 'bucket wines'. You can see the journalist here has actually said he thinks it's probably the best Pinot Grigio that he's ever tried from Australia - and we made it in a bucket! That's pretty exciting.



This is our Chalmers' brand [slide shown] and these are the kinds of varieties that we grow. We have taken ten years to build our brand to a point now where there is a real level of trust in the community about what we do. People know our story and they know the way that we approach our role as farmers and as custodians of the land as well - we have a responsibility of stewardship and we take that very seriously. People know that, when they buy a bottle of Chalmers' wine, we've thought about all of these things before that wine was put in that bottle and went to their table.

We're not resting on our laurels now. We're also looking at bringing in more new grape varieties, also from hot areas, to try to really change the way that we do things and make business more sustainable.

What I really want to be able to achieve is for people to understand that irrigators and the environmentalists are not enemies - they're allies - and some of us are wearing both hats. We want balance. We want a healthy future. We want a green and prosperous future for everybody - for communities, for cultures and for the land as well. This is just one example of how we can save water, we can make a greener future, and how we can make successful businesses and healthy communities all at the same time.