

Before we start I'd also like to acknowledge the traditional owners and also the traditional owners of the land where I live, which is Githabel country.



I'm from the Darling Downs. This first slide - I have put a little blue dot on it to show you where I come from. I wasn't actually born in Australia. I came here in the late 1960s. I'm a Navy brat and, as a result of being posted all around the world, really didn't have any roots at all until my husband and I and our then young son moved to the Darling Downs in 1987.

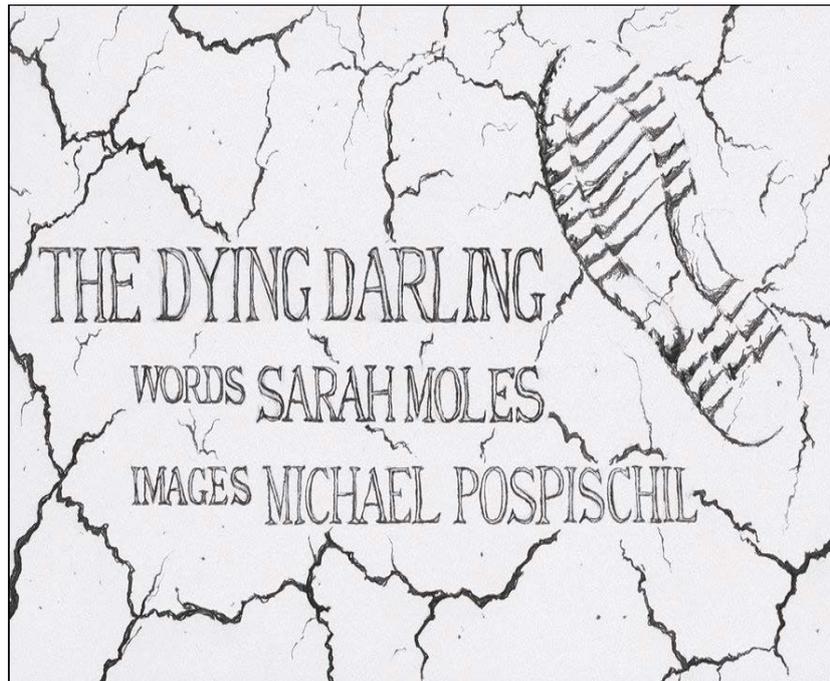
I've lived there for about half of my life, which is an eye blink in terms of the timescales in which Indigenous people talk about their connection to country. But my connection to country is deeply important to me. I'm a riparian landholder in the Upper Condamine. I live about as far from the mouth of the Murray as you can get and still be in the Murray-Darling Basin. I can see the watershed from my kitchen window, and that connection is why I do all the greenie stuff that I do.

I find water to be an incredibly emotional thing. I have an intrinsic understanding that without water there is no life and that it's the driving force of all nature. That's why I get involved in all these exceedingly bureaucratic committees and occasionally bang my head on desks wondering, 'Why aren't we getting anywhere? Will we ever get anywhere?' I don't want to make you think from the start that this is going to be terribly negative. We have gone places, but by God it's hard work.

I'm originally a photographer. I don't actually have any formal training in any of this natural resource management stuff. By dint of becoming a riparian landholder and suddenly discovering that 'Oh my God, you can't just sit here and let it happen, you actually have to manage this stuff,' including the creek that runs through your property, I found as many opportunities as I could to learn about the issues about natural resources. It's been my great privilege to work with some fantastic people in government departments, people who are scientists, particularly ecologists, who study salinity, vegetation and all kinds of really fascinating things. Although I certainly don't consider myself an expert in any of it, I have an overarching interest and passion for fresh water conservation. I spent three separate incarnations working for the World Wide Fund for Nature on wetland conservation in the Murray-Darling Basin. I suspect the sum total of all that experience was something that gave me enough credibility and enough credible things on my CV that led to my being appointed to the Murray-Darling Basin Commission's Community Advisory Committee and, as a result of that, onto the Living Murray Committee Reference Group. That's going back some time. The first step must have started in 2003 or 2004, but please don't quote me on the numbers.

My first observation as a Queensland representative on the CAC was: what the hell has this got to do with Queensland? All we ever talk about is the Murray River. Not that I didn't think that was important, I just wondered why Queensland was engaging in this process that really didn't have anything in it for Queensland. That was about the time that governments, not including Queensland, had committed a billion dollars to restoring the health of the living Murray, of choosing those icon sites such as the Ramsar wetlands along the river and the River Murray channel and really working hard to buy back water and to hit targets and to improve the health of those rivers, particularly the vegetation communities. We had red gum forests dying all over the Murray-Darling Basin - in dire straits. It had been far too long since we'd had colonial water bird breeding events. Those environmental alarm bells were really ringing.

Here I am perched at the top of the Darling and having been to some wonderful places in the Paroo wetlands and down the Darling to Menindee and the Gwydir wetlands, and all kinds of fabulous places if you happen to like wetlands, which I do. I was deeply frustrated that the Darling was completely missing in this whole conversation that was going on. It was just so far off, it wasn't even the ballpark. It was really a matter of great frustration. I talked about it to my husband, partner, lifelong pal who is a very competent artist: 'How about we do a project together and do something about the Darling? Instead of staying home to look after the chooks while I go off to all these fantastic places, how about you come out and meet some of these people and do their portraits, draw their landscapes, and I'll write a narrative?'



*The Dying Darling* was the result because it just wasn't on the radar. It was an excellent process to go through because it enriched my understanding. Unashamedly, I'm a photographer by training but I'm a greenie, an environmentalist, by inclination. This whole process of going and talking to people, interviewing people, we made a conscious decision to visit each of the major catchments in the Darling to talk to irrigators, flood plain glaziers, dry land farmers, local government people, Indigenous people in order to cover as broad a range of views and interests and sectors that are present in the Darling Basin as possible to give a rounded picture of what was actually going on.

Michael was kind enough to say, 'Okay, I'll stick my hand up and be the naïve observer and I'll be the person who asks the stupid questions.' I went, 'Hang on, honey, there aren't any stupid questions. This is really complicated.' But he did take on that role very willingly and he asked some very good questions. He said to me one day as we were driving home from Burke, 'You know, I thought the answer to this big problem that we're facing in the Darling Basin was going to be really obvious, it was just going to be irrigation. Too much water has been taken out for irrigation - end of story. And I've realized: if only it were that simple. It's much more complicated than that.' And indeed it is.

I live and work in a world populated by bureaucrats and scientists, mostly bureaucrats, and I guess I've become a bit of a policy wonk and I'm quite comfortable with bureaucratic jargon and language that I think they use deliberately to mystify people and make themselves really sound important - we deal with all this really complicated stuff that you plebs down there don't understand. Trying to transcribe what my interview subjects had told me without distorting their words gave me the most agonising case of writers block. I had no idea what it was like. It is physically painful. I had to throw a lot of what I wrote away, put it aside for

a while and go and do something else - anything else. I spent a lot of time sitting down on the creek in tears: 'Oh, God, I'm never going to write this stuff.'

I ended up cutting a whole lot of rushes and reeds, dismantling an old bush gate, and building a canoe out of barbed wire and lamandra leaves, which became part of the touring exhibition that Michael's work eventually became. I called it 'The State of the Darling' and the little didactic for it says, 'State of the Darling, barbed wire, lomandra leaves, brackets and no paddle.' I really thought at the time that we were up the proverbial creek in a dreadful canoe and no means of getting ourselves out of this dilemma. So that's a little bit about me and where I'm coming from.



One of the things Malcolm asked me to do was to reflect on the kinds of alliances that have been formed between environmentalists and other sectors in this long, difficult history that we've had that has led us to the Murray-Darling Basin plan. Very early on, environmentalists from the peak groups – Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF), Environment Victoria, New South Wales Nature Conservation Council, et cetera - who were active in the Murray-Darling Basin formed an alliance. Our obvious allies were the flood plain graziers, many of whom we had met through processes like the Living Murray Community Reference Group, the local committees and so on.

Those people were really struggling because the extent of over-allocation upstream from them meant that the country that they had specifically chosen in many cases to purchase for a grazing operation precisely because it was regularly inundated were no longer getting any of those floods. They were very thoroughly across the whole notion of what an environmental flow does in terms of productive grazing, and even in some cases productive dry land agriculture, because a decent flood would give

them sufficient soil moisture to keep their grasses growing or to provide a storage of water for a couple of years at least of decent crops or decent pastures to raise their cattle on. They were the obvious initial allies. Slightly less obvious were the shooters and fishing community. People would raise their eyebrows and say, 'How come you greenies are getting into bed with shooters?' The answer is: people who like to hunt ducks want water in wetlands, because ducks won't go there if there isn't any water. Similarly, people who love to fish need adequate flows at the right time and of the right temperature so that fish breed, fish migrate and fish grow so that there will be fish in rivers for them to catch.

Those were the early days of the alliance that environmentalists formed to contribute to the dialogue around how do we get to a place where we can have a Murray-Darling Basin plan. Since the Basin plan was formed, more recently the alliance has grown - if you're interested you can check out the lifeblood.org.au website <http://www.lifeblood.org.au> which contains a list down the side of all the groups who are involved in the Lifeblood Alliance. It's actually more extensive and wider than you might think. There are climate and health alliances - people who are concerned that the impacts of climate change are going to have dramatic impact on human health and therefore we need to keep water in rivers to keep rivers healthy so that people can be healthy. There are bird groups, fishing groups, local environment groups, and the environment groups that you would expect. But also farmers are becoming much more organised and there are now a number of environmental farmers networks across the place. I think that there will be greater and more extensive alliances formed as we get into implementing the Basin plan.

I had a hiatus of involvement in Murray-Darling Basin stuff between the time when the old MDB Commission was dissolved and the new MDB Authority started. It's only in the last year or so that I've picked that up again as a member of the Northern Basin Advisory Committee.

In the interim, the Lock the Gate Alliance, the campaign against inappropriate coal and coal seam gas mining, took over a big chunk of my life. There are a couple of reasons why the Lock the Gate campaign is relevant to this conversation. The first is that Lock the Gate has formed alliances with an extraordinary range of people. Many, many people who are involved in it are farmers. But there's also what I would consider to be quite right-wing groups such as Property Rights Australia involved in the alliance. There are churches, lawyers, doctors, nurses, people interested in the impact of toxic chemicals on our environment – so the list goes on and on, and I have no doubt that that will continue to grow.

The other reason why the Lock the Gate campaign is relevant to the Murray-Darling Basin is that there's a lot of coal seam gas extraction going on in the northern part of the Basin not so far from where I live. Potentially, there are some serious water quality impacts. If things go wrong and there are spills we could see quite a lot of very salty water with a whole lot of undesirable contaminants in our rivers, and all that's going

to make its way down to Adelaide, as if Adelaide doesn't have water quality problems enough.

The other issue is that extracting coal seam gas relies greatly on removing ground water so that the gas can flow. Our understanding of the degree of connection between groundwater systems and surface water systems in the Murray-Darling Basin is not great. We really do not know what the impacts are going to be. There's an awful lot of salt stored in the water that is being extracted from coal seams. Once upon a time, not so long ago, salinity was the crisis facing the Murray-Darling Basin. Then we moved on to environmental flows and then we had floods. In a way I believe that we are still reeling from one crisis to another. But it seems to me that, when we are spending hundreds of millions of dollars a year to deal with salinity across the Murray-Darling Basin, we should be extremely circumspect about mobilising millions of tonnes of salt and bringing it to the surface of the landscape where it could create further problems - and in some cases places where we don't have that problem at the moment precisely because the salt is stored out of sight, out of mind and safely below ground.

The other deep concern is that in this particular part of Queensland we are talking about ground water aquifers that are connected to the Great Artesian Basin where pressure is an extremely valuable resource. That's another issue, and we don't have time to discuss that today. Nevertheless we have all this ground water coming up out of the ground. There is no allocation. The companies can take as much of it as they need. We are going to have a very interesting water accounting problem at some time in the future, because some of this is being discharged into rivers and it's all very blurry. When you ask Queensland bureaucrats at least how this is going to be managed, they are far from clear about what the hell is actually going on and how it will be managed.

I would like to acknowledge that there has been a lot of progress. We have a Commonwealth Water Act for the first time; we have the Murray-Darling Basin Plan; we have the first draft of an Environmental Watering Plan; we have flagged the constraints to delivering environmental water - we will soon have a constraints management strategy. The new Murray-Darling Basin Authority is listening. That shot of the draft Basin plan on fire in Griffith, what a textbook case in how not to do community consultation. That was like watching someone walk backwards into a very rapidly spinning fan - what a disaster. It set the cause back a long time to patch that up. Trust is so hard to build but you can blow it so easily. Then people are very reluctant to rebuild it quickly after an incident like that. My sense of where we are at the moment is that whilst we have made great progress, we are still tending to put all our human-centered needs first, unlike Aboriginal people who put mother earth first and work back from there.

These are some things that I think it would do us well to remember as we move forward with the new Murray-Darling Basin Plan. My own view is

that we are still putting socio-economic priorities first, we still tend to see water as a commodity; we tend to value rivers water as an economic resource before we recognise it as a driving force of all nature.

At this particular time with an imminent federal election, in one sense I am heartened that there has been such bipartisan support not just for the Water Act but also for the Basin Plan. I am a little concerned when I look back at the Nationals' position as I wonder how much influence they might have on a Coalition government, if that is what we end up with, in terms of wanting to amend the Plan so that socio-economic concerns have primacy again rather than the more balanced approach that the authority is trying to deliver now.

I certainly understand that we are going to have a system of trade-offs, that we will be trying to balance environmental, social and cultural values to come up with the best compromise. But I am going to be very alarmed if everything becomes subservient once again to socio-economic needs. Above all I am very concerned that it's just going to be a political football and we will kick it around again and we will go back several years. Let's keep our fingers crossed for a good outcome!

I was on a teleconference maybe three weeks ago with members of the Murray-Darling Basin Authority and my Northern Basin Advisory Council colleagues. I raised the need for consistent terminology, which is something that we still don't have. The language between Queensland and the New South Wales is different. When you add up all the different kinds of water products and the way they are labeled, there are scores of them. Surely we could simplify that. I made some comment to the effect that 'Gosh, wouldn't it be good if we could have one consistent terminology across the whole Basin', and there were guffaws around the room - 'Dream on, Sarah, it will never happen.' I said, 'Hang on, why can it never happen?' 'Oh it's too hard.' I said: 'Come on, guys, surely that is not hard, it's a matter of political will.' We could agree, could we not, that we will work towards having a consistent terminology across the Basin. It doesn't sound to me like a really big deal just to have an agreement that we would work towards that.' What the authority and governments are asking us the community to do, that's really hard. They are asking us to restructure our communities but they won't play the game themselves so that everybody - not just people who work in bureaucracy - actually understands what the conversation is about. I don't reckon it's a big deal.

So, where are we going? There are some things that I think we still need to do. In addition to consistent terminology across the Basin, I think it would be very handy to have a set of coherent and consistent policies. The salinity coal seam gas stuff is an example that sticks in my mind. We are going to have to deal with the impacts of climate change somewhere down the track, and no doubt we will have to amend the Basin Plan at some point in the future.

Most of all though what I think has been missing from the debate today,

and it's there in Malcolm's video where Adrian Brown was speaking, he talked about the value of water – "It's just water running through your fingers". For me, that's the debate that we have not had and it's the debate that Australia (and not just those of us in the Murray-Darling Basin) really *needs* to have. What is the real value of water in all its roles and all its functions across the landscape? Not just its economic values but also its spiritual, cultural, social and environmental values. All these things need to be the subject of a very courageous conversation.

I would like to pay tribute to the *One River* team for cracking that open and allowing us to have a debate that is not framed in bureaucratic jargon but is a real conversation amongst real people living in the real world. Thank you.