

FOUR BEAUTIFUL SEASONS TWELVE FANTASTIC MONTHS ONE VERY BIG YEAR

Asa Wahlquist: Kumuwuki, Big Wave

This is the text of an address delivered by *One River* Reference Group member Asa Wahlquist at first of three *One River* Symposia, presented under the banner of *Undercurrents*. This session was held in Goolwa SA, as part of the Regional Arts Australia national biennial conference *Kumuwuki*.

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I would like to acknowledge the Ngarrindjeri people who are the traditional custodians of this land. I would like to pay my respects to the elders both past and present of the Ngarrindjeri nation.

One of the great symbols of the Murray River is the Murray cod. One old story is that on the Murray cod's swim bladder, there are tree-like markings that are a map of where the cod was born. Others say that the skin behind the gills is inscribed with a detailed picture of the part of the river where the cod lived.

I have lived in Sydney for more than half my life, but I am a fifth generation South Australian. I don't have gills or a swim bladder but I feel like somewhere, in a secret part of me, there is inscribed an indelible image of the Murray River. One of my first memories is waiting for the punt to cross the Murray River, on the way to visit my grandparents, who were blockies at Barmera. I can still see the red of the cliffs, the intense blue of the sky and the muddy swirling waters of the river. I have, as a result, an unreasonable love of the river, something I suspect I share with many, many people.

My professional interest in the River began in December 1991, when a one thousand kilometre long blue-green algal bloom infested the Darling River. It was a livid, stinking green, as clear an indication of ill-health as you could conjure. That was also the point when public thinking about the river changed. Until then, the river was largely seen as a pipeline that delivered water, and a sewer to take away waste. I remember standing on the banks of the Darling River with the then head of NSW Water, Peter Millington, who pronounced the bloom was like a riverine heart attack. In 1994 the Council of Australian Governments, COAG, decreed that river health must be taken into consideration in all future water decisions. Then the Murray-Darling basin Commission capped diversions from the Murray Darling, although Queensland did not sign and continued to develop: Cubbie Station is a symbol of that refusal.

Then came the big dry: which started 1997 in ended in 2010. Over most of that period, the average amount of water flowing into the River Murray was less than half the long-term annual average. Over the worst three years 2006 to 2009 the average amount of water flowing into the River Murray was just one-fifth of the long-term annual average. The Howard Government set up the \$10 billion national plan for water security, backed by the 2007 Water Act which requires long term average sustainable diversion limits that must reflect an 'environmental sustainable level of take'.

This brings me to the basin plan: The purpose of the plan is "to provide for the integrated management of the Basin water resources" by providing for "the establishment and enforcement of environmentally sustainable limits on the quantities of surface water and

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ground water that may be taken from the Basin water resources (including by interception activities like dams)". That use, it states, must be in a way that "optimises economic, social and environmental outcomes" and enables water "to reach its most productive use through the development of an efficient water trading regime across the Murray-Darling Basin". You no doubt saw the television images of irrigators in Griffith burning copies of the first draft basin plan. I believe they did not understand the underpinnings of the plan: that all water buybacks would be voluntary, and that those remaining in irrigation would have a more secure future.

The first draft considered three scenarios: an increase in the water available to the environment of 3000 billion litres or gigitalres (GL) 3500GL and 4000 GL/year. The current legal diversion limit is 13,700 GL a year. The Draft Basin Plan released last November proposes that surface water use be limited to 10,873 GL/y (long-term average). This means returning 2750 GL to the river. The Federal Government has already purchased 1,330 GL through the water buyback - in other words, half that target. Peter Cullen, arguably Australia's best known water scientist, used to say that debates about water are really debates about the sort of society and the sort of environment we want to live in. Many people think 2750 GL is not enough. The Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists, for example, points out around 6,900 GL is needed to achieve all the environmental targets with a high level of certainty.

Many other people think it is too much, or at least that too much will be taken from their valley or stretch of the river. This is One River we are talking about, but there are many, many stories, and many ways to see it. Underlying all of this is the necessity to change, and I want to inject a note of optimism here, to tell some of the stories of how we have changed.

I mentioned that my grandparents had a fruit block at Barmera. In 1970 my parents purchased land at Mudgee, in central NSW, and planted not only a vineyard, but hundreds of trees. My grandfather was not impressed: trees, he said, robbed the soil. In 2001 I travelled the length of the Murray, and wrote an article about that trip for the Weekend Australian Magazine. I wrote about my visit to Calperum Station near Renmark, part of the Bookmark Biosphere reserve, where local volunteer land carers worked, caring for the Mallee that was once thought hard land to love. My mother absolutely insisted I take her there. She would not take no for an answer. So we travelled to Calperum and Pamela Parker generously drove us around the station, pointing out plants and places of interest. My mother marvelled at the country revealed to her by Pamela's insights. Several times she sighed, "and my father always said this was rubbish country". Now my grandfather was a good man, he did what was expected of him. But the way we see the world changes. In my own family, I have seen the way the way the Mallee is viewed change dramatically. And this makes me wonder, what will the next generation see differently, and value differently from us?

Great changes are required, but we are capable of them. Let me remind you of some we have already made. When I first began work as a rural journalist, on the ABC Country Hour, I was not permitted to do stories about trees. The saying which was only partly in jest was, if it moves shoot it, if it doesn't chop it down. The farm women I spoke to only ever identified themselves as wives, and indigenous people were invisible. Today one in three farmers belongs to Landcare, and many actually call themselves environmentalists and fight for the river. Many farm women now rightfully identify themselves as farmers. Australia now has native title, the Indigenous Land Corporation, and indigenous training programs. There is certainly a way to go in all, but think for a minute of just how far we have come.

And we have shifted from seeing the river as a pipeline and a sewer, to having value in its own right. This is happening on all levels: bureaucratic, political, community and personal, agricultural and environmental, all underpinned by a growing body of science. This is an extraordinary undertaking: to return water to the river. No where in the world has this been attempted. And the world is watching how Australia manages restoring the Murray Darling to sustainability. If it was an Olympic sport we'd have a gold medal.

The Murray is One River, but it has so many stories. Each family, each kinship group, every township has its own unique story to tell about its relationship with this One River. And within every story is the desire to keep telling it, for that story to flourish and grow, for others to hear it, and respect it. I've spoken to countless farmers along the length and breadth of the basin. Every single one is proud of what they produce, whether they are a rice farmer in

the Riverina who can tell you how many people they feed, a sheep producer along the Darling River who now produces meat rather than wool sheep, a dairy farmer in northern Victoria whose milk is value-added locally, creating employment in their community, or a winegrape or citrus grower. I could go on. All are united by the river, their pride in their produce, and their desire for their livelihood, their communities and the river to be sustainable.

It is too easy to get into an us and them argument: that is what politicians do, and they have not served the River well. Water is like nothing else: the water of the river serves so many functions: environmental and agricultural, it supports human and industrial needs, it brings life to a myriad native creatures, from river red gums and Murray cod to tiny invertebrates and modest wildflowers. It inspires artists and energises scientists. It has sustained countless generations, physically and spiritually. It is home on the deepest level to so many.

The Murray is one river, but it is all these things. It is our responsibility, and this is the challenge to those of us who love it.

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