

2024 Peter Cullen Trust Water Symposium

Panel Presentation – Kate McBride (2022)

Thursday 23 May, 2024
Old Parliament House, Canberra

When water is scarce, what will we prioritise?

Only when the last tree has been cut down, the last fish eaten and the last river poisoned, will we realise that we cannot eat money. There are a few variations I've seen of this quote but it sticks with me and I think is important to think about these days.

We live in Australia, water is scarce and we are not prioritising it appropriately from my perspective.

When I got started in water advocacy many years ago I remember being told there was a 'hierarchy of needs' when it comes to water that went 1- critical human needs and the environment 2-stock and domestic 3- permanent plantations 4-annual crops. But I have seen anything but this play out. In Australia today, water flows to the highest bidder and the most powerful people and that's a sad reality.

Even a recent NSW ICAC report highlighted that water policy was essentially skewed to benefit irrigators. We have seen report, after report say the Darling Baaka critically needs more flows and despite this, our river continues to be neglected, our fish left to die and our communities wither away. It always makes me think, what is this country, rather than calling them 'water entitlements', what if we called them 'water privileges'.

Today I could go into my own experiences more and why I feel so passionately about this, what it was like standing beside wailing Barkandji women watching the last murray cod gasping for oxygen, what it's like walking along kilometres of bone dry river walking past dead Baaka muscels or talking to First Nations people as millions of their totem fish, the bony bream wash up on the banks of the once Mighty Darling Baaka River. The smell of rotting fish in the Summer heat or the heartbreak of creatures great and small perished along the river ecosystem.

For those of you that attended the dinner last night Paul put it so incredibly well last night, the Darling Baaka is collapsing and what's clear is when water is scarce, our river is not being prioritised.

I have seen vested interests attempt to change the narrative, to tell people these rivers are meant to go dry and fish should perish but that's so far from the truth. All we need to do is listen to our First Nations brothers and sisters who have tens of thousands of years knowledge. This is not the norm, and if we look at what the river is telling us; what the Darling Baaka muscels can tell us about flows, or the river red gums along rivers and creeks, telling us where, and how often water use to run in these areas. We have

changed the system so massively in recent decades that it is almost unrecognisable, but the land and its knowledge holders still remember. While I'm not naive to the fact we will never return our rivers to their natural state, we do need science to understand the extent of damage that has been done.

Andrew said last night that vested interests are stronger than ever in this space, and every one of us in this room has a responsibility to call out wrong and shine a light on injustices within water policy.

I've been asked to leave you with a challenge, but first a vision.

The river I know today is not the river past generations have known, and the river my children will know will not be the river I have. I hope it is a healthier river, but it is going to take a massive effort from everyone in this room and beyond to achieve that.

So my question to you is, what are you doing to contribute to this hope?