

# Future directions for managing water reform?

by Dr Daniel Connell\*

*I think it is urgent that we rethink our positions and define new policy and research paths for the future.*

**W**ater reform in Australia — and I suspect world wide — has slipped down the public policy priority list in recent years, but if anything the situation is more dire than it was before.

Implementing integrated catchment management, or integrated water resource management, has proved to be very difficult and there are few success stories. In part the response seems to have been to stop talking about holistic water reform, given the ongoing failure to achieve it, and instead concentrate on more limited regional and sectoral objectives.

The critique of traditional approaches to water management which became dominant during the 1990s still stands unanswered even if increasingly ignored. Given this situation we need to go back to basics, reassess what we should retain from the recent past, and intensify debate about future directions.

A central focus of the late 20th century paradigm was emphasis on the importance of a 'whole of hydrological systems' approach to water management. In the Murray-Darling Basin, however, governments have

reverted to a focus on protecting 'key assets'. This encourages the view that as long as it looks OK for the majority of voters it is acceptable.

However, once separated from a whole-of-system ecological approach to sustainable management, the criteria that can be used to measure success become very vague. An 'asset' is easily treated as an optional extra to be afforded only if its preservation does not involve too much political pain for decision-makers. This ignores the hard-won understanding that environmental conditions are the result of many interacting factors.

Managing for defined targets in specific sites neglects the processes that shape outcomes in the longer term or for the whole ecological system. An example is the crucial relationship between stream channels and their floodplains — central to riverine health — that has been made more tenuous by the loss of small and medium-level floods.

This slippage in the discourse is closely related to the evolution of the management processes used to manage conflicts between competing stakeholders.

In the Murray-Darling Basin there is strong pressure to allow for State political demands for autonomy in land management and regional policy under the legislative framework established by the Water Act 2007/08. But the concept of integrated catchment-wide management (ICM) is at the core of the *international* literature about how to minimise negative impacts and share costs and benefits in highly developed landscapes.

As was recognised in the Council of Australian Governments' water reform package approved in 1994, ICM provides a very useful framework for discussions about protecting water quality and making trade-offs between competing stakeholders. For example, some stakeholders, irrigators, urban centres and environmentalists are focused on streams and wetlands and want to maximise flows in-stream. Others, such as dryland farmers, tree-plantation developers and environmentalists interested in promoting vegetation



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*continued from p. 5*

growth for biodiversity, want to maximise water retained in the landscape.

Without an ICM framework decisions about such conflicts become little more than an expression of raw political power. This is what we saw in the later stages of the consultations involved in negotiating the Basin Plan in the lead up to its approval in 2012, when the precautionary principle was reversed.

Originally this principle required care that management interventions be assessed for the risk that they would trigger difficult-to-reverse ecological threshold changes. (Many examples have been experienced world-wide and in the Murray-Darling Basin resulting in considerable loss of biodiversity and productivity.) Now the imperative is to justify taking water from the historical level of development.

This reversal of the original precautionary principle creates enormous political pressure to show benefits in the short term (preferably measured in dollars) for any water returned to the environment, even

though in most cases it is realistic to expect only diffuse longer term benefits which are often hard to link to specific interventions.

We have apparently lost the conceptual framework of ecological systems thinking, or resilience thinking, that underpinned the water reform movement of the past 20 or 30 years. New options such as nexus thinking have emerged, but the principles behind them are very vague.

It is not productive to just keep reiterating old thinking, however, so I think it is urgent that we rethink our positions and define new policy and research paths for the future. As a potential catalyst for such a process, **I can think of no better organisation than the Peter Cullen Trust to lead the way.**

*\*Dr Daniel Connell is a Friend of the Peter Cullen Trust based at the Crawford School of Public Policy at the Australian National University.*



Jerrabomberra wetlands on the Molonglo River, a tributary of the Murrumbidgee River. Through the National Water Initiative, Australian governments agreed to implement water management plans designed to take account of a wide range of stakeholders and achieve sustainability. Daniel Connell asks: 'Is that still the goal in the Murray-Darling Basin, or have we pulled back to more limited regional or sectorial principles?'