Resolving conflicts over water

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Water is a scarce and precious resource and there are differing views in society as to how we should use it.

Productive agriculture, urban areas, golf courses, nature conservation, tourism and recreation all make their claim on our water resources. How can we reconcile the conflicts arising from different interest groups pushing what they see as the most important use of water?

We seek win-win outcomes where each interest group substantially gets its needs met. While this may not always be possible, it should be our aim. Win-lose outcomes are often unstable, as winners gloat and losers scheme.

We have learned much over the last 20 years about the special features of environmental conflicts, and we are developing new ways of resolving them. There are six principles emerging:

- All the players and interests need to be actively involved
- Knowledge needs to be shared
- There needs to be some process to manage negotiation to avoid stalling and stalemate
- A good solution will meet everyone's needs as much as possible
- People often have different needs that must be identified
- The solution needs to be clear and well-documented so that it is not challenged later by someone who thinks they might gain a greater advantage.

It is also a mistake to assume there is a fixed amount of water to fight over. One person's wastes may be another person's resource.

Recent work on environmental allocations indicates that we might be able to return flow signals to the environment without greatly reducing the amount of water available for other uses. The environmental flows experiment being conducted by this CRC is looking to restore flow pulses to the Campaspe River by transmitting a percentage of inflows through the dam, at Lake Eppalock. This adds a marginal risk to the time it may take for the dam to fill and spill. While it does not put a demand on the amount of water available to irrigators, it should give a considerable benefit to the environment.

Inherent in any conflict is five key elements, each of which requires a different strategy to resolve.

1. **Interest elements** refer to the self-interests of the people involved. Players may be competing to exploit a resource for irrigating crops or for tourism. They have a personal financial involvement in the outcome.

2. **Value elements** involve fundamental belief systems about the importance of things like our responsibility for land, water and the plants and animals that depend upon them. Players need not have any personal involvement, nor even to be theoretically well-versed, to have a strong position on these values.

3. **Data elements** arise when people lack the information to make wise decisions. They may be misinformed about likely outcomes or may disagree about what data are relevant or how it should be interpreted. The amount of water required to support the environment and its delivery is a classic situation where imperfect information makes resolution difficult.

4. **Labelling elements** enter a conflict when players give other players negative labels that may introduce misconceptions and stereotypes. "Greenies", "dole bludgers" and "blacks" can all be used as pejorative terms to avoid listening to what people are saying and responding to the substance of their concern. A good rule for conflict resolution is 'be soft on people, hard on issues'.

5. **Structural elements** relate to the organisational structures that we erect to manage a resource. Conflicts between water agencies and environment protection agencies are one example.

We have an emerging set of tools for dispute resolution, and the community is slowly learning to use these tools effectively.

Better knowledge is fundamental to better decision making, and it needs to be available to all. It also needs to be good enough for us to make reasonable predictions on how systems will respond if we implement changes.

Knowledge will not, however, help us decide whether those changes are socially acceptable. We invented politics to deal with those sorts of value judgements.

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