

The Murray Estuary

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I know some people are still grappling with the politics of the Lower Murray. I've drafted the following to try and provide some background, some understanding of why there is not a single politician in Australia prepared to speak publicly in support of the restoration of the Murray River's estuary....

For years now I've been writing about the barrages, really sea dykes that block inflows from the Southern Ocean making the vast shallow coastal lagoons at the end of the Murray River completely dependent on Murray River inflows. Without the dykes the sea would push in each autumn and for longer periods during drought.

Somewhat disappointingly for me there is not one state or federal politician who will take up this issue of the Lower Lakes and in particular how the current management of Lake Alexandrina as an artificial freshwater oasis is unsustainable.

That was my message to Labor, Liberal, National and Greens Senators and MPs representing voters from across the Murray Darling when I visited Canberra in July last year. My trip was funded by Johnny Kahlbetzer from Twynam Agricultural Group. My message was that:

1. The health of a river system is more than the quantity of water flowing downstream;
2. Current management of Lake Alexandrina as an artificial freshwater oasis is unsustainable; and
3. Restoring the Murray River's estuary must be a priority in any Murray Darling Basin Plan.

I was surprised to learn that all the politicians seemed to know about the barrages: the 7.6 kilometres of sea dyke that hold back the tide.

And they mostly agreed when I suggested that much of the current water reform agenda is based on a false premise because the water being 'saved' is likely to end up in Lake Alexandrina that is not a natural environment.

But the same politicians said restoring the estuary would be too hard, too political, and it was potentially a vote loser in South Australia.

It is South Australian government policy that Lake Alexandrina be considered a freshwater lake. This story goes right back to the foundation myths associated with the settlement of South Australia. Potential migrants were encouraged to buy land, sight unseen, on the basis that Lake Alexandrina was a fresh water lake and had a reliably navigable passage to the sea. Both untrue.

South Australians have never come to terms with the true nature of the Lower Murray and they have just made things worse by building the sea dykes so they avoid any discussion of the associated issues. More recently they have learnt it is popular to blame upstream irrigation for Lake Alexandrina running out of fresh water and the Murray Mouth closing over.

If the proposed Murray Darling basin water plan goes ahead in its current form it will be just building on this nonsense. Its time a politician, someone, spoke in the Australian parliament about these issues. As long as the current farce continues we are all the poorer, but particularly agricultural interests in the Murray Darling.

Yet agricultural interests continue to fail to speak up on this issue. As I explained in January this year industry leaders are behaving like turkeys...

ONCE upon a time there was a turkey that lived in a pen. Every morning a farmer brought food and water and talked to the turkey with soothing words.

The turkey thought it was special and would always be looked after.

Then one Christmas Eve, the farmer came with an axe instead of food.

Many organisations in rural Australia behave like turkeys. They are happily taking money from government believing they will keep getting fed. Of course government is handing out a lot of money at the moment.

In return, organisations might complain publicly just a bit about government. But mostly these organisations keep sending their representatives off to meetings and their leaders happily sit down with Ministers who feed them soothing words.

All the while, at the behest of environmental groups, Commonwealth and State governments, whether Coalition or Labour, have continued in the past decade or two to enact regulation and legislation that undermines food production.

It's justified on the basis that environmentalists are the good guys, while farmers exploit natural resources for profit.

In the next few months there is an opportunity for some farm organisations to stop behaving as turkeys and instead bite the hand that has fed them so generously over the last year. It would involve calling the bluff of the Commonwealth Government over the Murray Darling water plan.

Instead of complaining politely about the plan on the basis industry might lose some water, what about rural leaders pointing out the obvious: that the plan will deliver no environmental benefit until something is done about the 7.6 kilometres of concrete barrage that sits across the bottom of the Lower Lakes?

Anyone vaguely familiar with this issue knows that Murray Darling Basin Authority boss Craig Knowles and Water Minister Tony Burke – and even Opposition leader Tony Abbot

and Opposition water spokesman Barnaby Joyce – don't want the issue of the barrages or the Lower Lakes raised in polite discussion.

It could cost them votes in South Australia. So industry and community leaders leave it well alone.

But with the New Year it's time for a new approach: it's time industry leaders took the high moral ground for once and confronted the issue of the barrages that have destroyed the River Murray's estuary.

And while they are doing the right thing, they should sign the Rivers Need Estuaries petition of the Australian Environment Foundation, link [here](#).

Also posted at my blog... www.jennifermarohasy.com