



# Community spirit

DEBORAH NIAS AND ADRIAN WELLS SHARE THEIR STORY OF WORKING WITH INSPIRING COMMUNITIES OVER THE PAST 25 YEARS TO RESTORE WETLANDS ALONG THE MURRAY AND DARLING RIVERS.

To many people in the Murray–Darling Basin, terms such as ‘environmental flows’, ‘restoring wetting and drying cycles to wetlands’, and ‘cultural flows’ are very much part of community discussions about implementing the Basin Plan. They are also regarded as relatively new terms. Yet, 30 years ago, community groups began to trial these concepts, many of which have now been replicated by governments and have strong relevance in delivering environmental flows today. These efforts also developed workable and effective frameworks for how environmental watering can best occur.

Much of this knowledge and experience has been implemented by the Murray Darling Wetlands Working Group, which celebrates its 25th anniversary this year. Founded in 1993, it has an enviable record of research, community engagement and on-ground delivery that has attracted regional, national and even international recognition.

In 1992, the New South Wales Murray Wetlands Working Group was formed with the aim of rehabilitating wetlands along the Murray River, and within the first 12 months, had successfully flooded Lake Gol Gol, and was undertaking a preliminary investigation of Thegoa Lagoon at Wentworth. Funds for a regulator at the Moira Lake had also been sourced, and piezometers were installed in the Poon Boon Lakes to study groundwater movement. A management plan for Gulpa Creek was being drawn up, and wetland management guidelines for councils had been published.

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## The Moira Lake ‘springboard’

It was the Moira Lake project that brought the group wide recognition and became the springboard for some of its innovative work. By 1992, Moira Lake in the Barmah–Millewa Forest had been permanently flooded for at least 50 years due to high summer flows in the Murray River. There had been a major decline in environmental values, impacting in particular on waterbird and fish breeding. Despite some reservations by the then Murray–Darling Basin Commission, the Wetlands Working Group secured the required funds to complete a series of regulators around the lake. With the lake completely regulated, it began to dry out for the first time in 50 years, with an almost immediate environmental impact. The project was the first to also engage with Aboriginal people through the Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Council.

An unanticipated outcome of the Moira Lake project was the realisation by the Wetlands Working Group that by regulating the water entering and leaving the lake, significant water had been ‘saved’. In 1993, the Wetlands Working Group prepared a proposal for the NSW Department of Water Resources, suggesting that an allocation of the saved water be given to them to rehabilitate more wetlands. In 2001, they become the custodians of 32,000 megalitres of government high and low security water for the next eight years. The Wetlands Working Group could also trade a portion of unused water, with the funds to be used to improve environmental flow conditions.

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Over eight years, just over 74,000 megalitres of environmental water was delivered to 215 wetlands, covering more than 67,000 hectares. As well as the 150 landowners involved, the project collaborated with Aboriginal groups, irrigation companies, government agencies, and catchment management authorities.

## Watering wetlands on private property

The idea of rehabilitating wetlands on private property was first raised with the Wetlands Working Group in September 1995. Many of the wetlands in the Murray catchment are on irrigation farms. Even though they are scattered, collectively they add enormously to the diversity of the landscape. By 2000, many had been dry for up to 30 years, cut off from flow paths of high rivers because of irrigation infrastructure. Following discussions with Murray Irrigation Ltd, the Wetlands Working Group decided it could probably get water into these private wetlands by using the company’s irrigation infrastructure.

The project clearly demonstrated that it was possible to deliver environmental water using irrigation infrastructure and pumps. While responses to the waterings varied, some wetlands that had been isolated from their natural water sources for up to 30 years responded with positive ecological outcomes. Consecutive watering events in wetlands greatly improved tree condition, helping to establish a diverse and abundant understorey community. The project also identified growing awareness amongst irrigators about the significance of wetlands, and how their ecological processes could contribute to commercial farming operations. Some irrigators started to put their own precious water into wetlands on their properties, others donated water for wetlands on public land.



### FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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## The role of civil society

Today, water for the environment is largely managed and controlled by Commonwealth and state agencies. There is, however, increasing interest and demand from sectors of ‘civil society’ to be more directly engaged with watering for environmental and/or cultural outcomes.

In 2016, the Wetlands Working Group (now Murray Darling Wetlands Working Group Ltd) joined with The Nature Conservancy Australia to manage and own Australia’s first Environmental Water Trust. The Trust is dedicated to improving social and ecological outcomes for the wetlands and rivers of the Basin, and is supported by the Murray–Darling Basin Balanced Water Fund, which brings social impact investment into conservation using market-based initiatives.

This unique model is enabling partnerships between community and government to achieve ecological and social outcomes at a local and landscape scale. It is also demonstrating that cooperation across many stakeholders and jurisdictions is not only possible, but desirable. For example, through the Trust the Wetlands Working Group are working with Aboriginal communities and the Commonwealth Environmental Water Office to integrate cultural and environmental outcomes in New South Wales, as well as implementing projects with private landholders and irrigation companies to deliver water for conservation. This new market-based approach to water management for environmental and social outcomes in the Murray–Darling Basin is a significant and historic moment in Australia’s water reform process.