

Our river our future...

South Australian community stories

Our River, Our Future

The South Australian Government recently called on South Australians to share their personal stories about the devastating effects of the millennium drought on a special website – Our River, Our Future.

Years of over-allocation exacerbated by the worst drought on record and a changing climate combined to devastate communities and threaten Adelaide's water supply.

The following pages include personal reflections from South Australians about their association with the river and how they vividly recall the devastating effects of the millennium drought on them and the broader South Australian community.



Jock Adams

I am a farmer living an hour out of Murray Bridge. The drought nearly ruined my family business. We have been farming here for four generations and the ashes of many relatives have been scattered on our property here.

I hope we never again get into the state we had to endure in 2005-2008. What a disaster. Even in times of drought there should still be enough water to go around. The river has a huge basin and there is no need for it to be plundered to the extent that it is further upstream. Drought will come again, I can guarantee that - but I hope we will be far more fairly treated in SA than we have been in previous years.

I have known farmers who have committed suicide because of the hopelessness that they were facing. I can't say much more than that.

SA needs people to stand up and try to fix this mess.

I hope some of you get the chance to visit this beaut piece of SA. It's expansive, empty landscape has a unique beauty about it and if you take time to sit and stare at the emptiness you will soon see that it is filled with action.

Cleo Kent

Our family tried really hard to save water during the drought. Living in suburban Adelaide meant a dying garden and buckets in the shower. We spent about \$200 on a grey water recycling bin but it required a lot of maintaining. In the end some of our trees died anyway.

But really, what we had to deal with was minimal compared to people who live in the country and make their living from growing stuff. Pulling out fruit trees and vines in the Riverland must have been soul-destroying for those people who had spent their lives building up the blocks.

It's easy to forget the drought now. But it was pretty depressing and climate change means more years of poor rains. We need a plan that takes this into account.

Chelsea Dix

I am from a 5th generation pioneering family in Renmark in the Riverland.

Unfortunately over the past 5 years my family has needed to move away due to the water crisis with the fear of losing jobs.

In the Riverland all towns are solely reliant on the river as the name suggests. Without the correct water allocations the 'fruit bowl' will die and we will find ourselves eating more fruit and vegetables from overseas than we do now. It is hard to come to terms with moving away from everything you know, leaving your family home behind, leaving your friends and family behind to start a new life where you can get a job not reliant on whether there will or will not be water.

When I read articles a few years ago about people complaining to the State Government about not being able to water their gardens it made me so angry.

Riverlanders are getting bad prices for fruit which has only been grown because another crop has been sacrificed. Blockies are going into massive debt which they did not have, trying to buy water just to keep trees alive, not even to produce fruit. While an hour and a half away on the Victorian side of the border they're getting double the water allocation that SA receives.

I cannot believe that in this great country the river is still managed state by state. It truly is a joke! Please help the beautiful Riverland and its communities. There are many locals fighting for what is right.

Sharon Smith

The drought brought our suburban home dying gardens and continuous dust being blown in from the country areas resulting in continual cleaning and an exacerbation of me and my pet's allergies.

Seeing photos and newsreels of lambs being abandoned by their mothers because of thirst and starvation on the farms broke my heart. I remember farmers feeding their sheep oranges because that's all that was available. If the eastern states weren't so greedy growing inappropriate crops like cotton and rice this drought might not have had such a huge impact on South Australia.

I still keep the buckets in our shower because of the cost of water and because we know just how precious it is.

Faith Cook

Thank you for the opportunity to talk about the impact of the drought on the SA portion of the River Murray.

From an urban perspective, I believe the emergency of the drought brought water to the forefront of people's minds. It helped us think about where our water comes from. We started the journey toward Adelaide being independent of the River for water.

Unfortunately, it also brought on the knee-jerk reaction of the Desalination Plant. I believe that a more sustainable option, such as stormwater ASR or sewage reuse would have been better, longer term solutions. Now that the pressure is off, we are unlikely to see these things implemented in a coordinated way, particularly given the policy restrictions on domestic implementation of these water supplies.

From a catchment management perspective, the drought also led to a lot of emergency responses. It took the focus off dryland salinity actions (which result in less salt entering the Murray and more sustainable agriculture) and focused it almost entirely on short term water security and restoration of the Lower Lakes. Both of these aspects are important and the work on the Lower Lakes is amazing, however a slower, more sustained management of these issues would have improved financial efficiency while providing the community more reliable support.

It takes time to get the community on side and to deliver the best possible outcomes, for the lowest possible price.

Glen Jones

BOATING INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION
of SOUTH AUSTRALIA

We employ 3000 in this State. Sadly, we can be overlooked as stakeholders.

In SA, over 40 "local communities" which rely on tourism/leisure along the River and Lakes & the Coorong were directly and most seriously negatively impacted by the recent long lasting drought.

We have worked with all "drought" affected sectors and with those whose speciality is the environment.

We all know and agree on what we need.

We in this industry are not silver tailed boaties (whatever they are).

We are small, often family owned businesses.

Boat building, houseboat hire/charter, cruising people, marinas and slipways.

We employ repair/maintenance people, numerous trades, engineers and builders and apprentices.

We're into providing safe, happy, healthy, environmentally friendly holidays and leisure for everyone.

We, with our holiday maker clients and closely related industries, support the Murray and Lakes' local produce, the pubs & restaurants, the B&Bs, the caravan parks, the groceries and takeaway shops and the ATMs.

We need happy, healthy, thriving communities

We need good environmental conditions.

We need good quality water in acceptable quantities.

A naturally open Murray Mouth, all the time, will provide this.

A naturally open Murray Mouth, always, also provides minimum, acceptable water levels Hume to the Mouth. It guarantees the flushing of the salt and the other toxic elements.

It protects the Coorong.

Dianne Pennington

I am a West Coast person I have always been told (and told off) on how to conserve and reserve the resources around me.

I spent 20 years in Adelaide and found the River a wonderful experience, bringing up my children to a weekend away next to the river. Sadly seeing it deplete over the years.

I had a feeling that something or somebody was holding back this vast amount of water and it became to dangerous to jump of the jetty with our children. Only to find out about water levees then water restrictions.

I'm only hoping all the water up stream is allowed to flow on its natural course down. Who are our main consumers of the Murray and What has changed since 1968. IRRIGATION and greedy people. I have since returned to the West Coast, brought 2 gigantic water tanks and my family and I have rain water out of our taps. My Children will now be taught about conserving.

Silver Moon

Here's my personal story.

I live on a farm by the Finnis River. In a spring fed pool in the river there are lots of different native fish. They have survived there because there is a waterfall that stops the carp coming up from the Murray and eating them all. Some of them are very rare.

We have always known this pool as being a "permanent" pool but during the drought there was that long nasty heatwave that seemed to go on forever.

What happened was that so many people were pumping out of the aquifer that the river just sank into the ground. It was like you had pulled a plug out of the bath.

Luckily we saw it happening and the last fish were saved in a single bucket before the river dried out.

We were scared that suddenly we had the responsibility of looking after whole species of fish. So we went around and talked to the neighbours and asked them to stop watering or at least pull back to see if we could get the river back. Most of the irrigators did reduce their watering.

This story shows two things- First that irrigators will respond positively if we can clearly see that there is a problem. Second that the authorities are not taking groundwater properly into account with their water allocation plans.

It is clear that the Murray Darling Basin plan doesn't understand that ground water and surface water have to be treated in the same way that everything is connected.

Tim Kelly

My story about the Murray is that of admiration. From working out of the Murray Bridge workshops on the major pumping systems for Adelaide, and irrigation return pumps I have come to appreciate how important this system is for South Australia. Travelling across eastern Australia from the Great Dividing Range and across the hills and plains I see how the system underpins communities and a vast array of river and wetland environments.

Scientists from the Wentworth Group and Goyder Institute have in my view raised serious concerns that the 2750 GL return will not be enough for a healthy working system.

For years, the inability to deliver adequate flows through the river system resulted in the need for continual dredging of the Murray Mouth, the virtual collapse of the Coorong to support much of its birdlife, low water levels and unusable water quality in Lake Albert and Lake Alexandrina, high salinity, exposure of acid sulphate soils, inability of lower lake communities to access water, drying of wetlands, loss of mature red gum forests, bank cracking and slumping and the list goes on. As a Climate Project presenter, I also heard first hand from irrigators who were experiencing a massive reduction in their allocations during this time.

For fairness and the environment where the change is made to fix the health of the system it must work. It must deliver a healthy working river system that is more resilient in times of low intake and drought.

Edward Mark

I consider what the plan completely overlooks is the natural cycle of the system, as a “townie” whose parents owned a “shack” I played in the 56 flood waters and also fished in them.

Every 4 years without fail the floods would come just over the floodplain, about knee deep and flush the system. River gums would flower and the ecosystem would regenerate, the water would smell different not like some septic drainage channel. Time to think laterally is it viable to grow European water hungry produce in the driest continent in the world, seems self defeating to me. Local knowledge, locally grown native produce uses less water and as a society we just might be a damn sight healthier, if it can't be returned to its natural cycle then at least mimic it.

Nardine Habner

Our family moved to Goolwa, at the end of the Murray River, almost 11 years ago. My first memories of the Murray River were of a strong, dominating water body, which demanded respect and instilled a certain amount of fear for those contemplating entering or crossing it.

The millennium drought revealed how quickly this majestic river could be transformed into a weak trickle of water, unable to run its full course to the sea. The wide expanse of river at Goolwa became just a thin channel, bordered by sandy plains harbouring harmful acid sulphate soils. Goolwa had fallen victim to Australia's mismanagement of our river system. The river was dying, the land becoming toxic - and our home town was dying. The speed and extent of the river's decline saddened me most.

We must remember how close this river system was to collapse. The MDBP is Australia's chance to ensure this river system remains healthy. We must acknowledge the mistakes made overseas in water management (such as the Aral Sea) and learn from this. We must understand that we need a healthy river to support healthy river communities. The science suggests that 2750 billion litres is not enough to support a healthy river system. I do not support the MDBP in its current form, and propose that planners focus on the needs of the river for the benefit of all.