



The Wimmera's Flowing Tale

...going with the flow

The Wimmera River's 'Big Break'

*I love a sunburnt country,
A land of sweeping plains,
Of ragged mountain ranges,
Of droughts and flooding rains.*

From 'My Country', Dorothea Mackellar

Phil Colquhoun took this aerial photo near Jeparit of water from the Wimmera River flowing into Lake Hindmarsh during the September 2010 floods.



When Australian poet Dorothea Mackellar penned these words in 1904, she captured what makes this region so special and in the last line, what the people of the Wimmera have experienced throughout the past decade.

When rain returned in spring 2009 it was the cause of great celebration, but little did everyone know that more rain was to come and when it did, it would not only cause more celebration but heartbreak as well.

Flood events in September and December 2010, followed by one of the biggest floods in the Wimmera's history in January 2011 caused hardship to many people.

It has also led to an explosion of life... **both good** - such as masses of birds and catfish breeding... **and bad** - with increasing numbers of carp and the inevitable spread of weeds into places they've never been before.

Jonathan Starks looks for birds at Lake Hindmarsh after water returns in late 2010. Photo by Melissa Powell Photography PS Jonathan is still waiting for pelicans to breed again at Lake Hindmarsh

"1967, I think, was the last time pelicans were recorded breeding at Lake Hindmarsh. Now that they have moved in because of the water and fish levels, it'd be really interesting to know if they are going to breed here again."

Jonathan Starks, Wimmera CMA bird monitoring program coordinator, February 2011

Looking back to 2011

Dorothea's poem is also a reminder that in Australia, opportunity closely follows adversity. For example, the 2010-2011 floods achieve outcomes that far surpass the benefits and aims of regulated environmental water releases.

Soils, vegetation, birds and wildlife will reap the benefits for many years to come of water that is soaking into floodplain wetlands such as the Barabool Forest near Murtoa. And the large doses of water into Lake Hindmarsh are leading to an explosion of bird, bug, plant and fish life. Plus, water harvested into storages will help secure environmental and consumptive water supplies for the future, meaning harsh water restrictions can be eased

The national media spotlight helps the region's economy recover through increased tourism that is flowing with the return of water. Popular television program Coxy's Big Break goes to air in May 2011 with this quote from Coxy:

"Now that water has returned to the Wimmera River, it's teeming with bird and fish life... I don't care if we don't catch any fish, look at this! It's beautiful. I have never seen the river looking as good."

Looking forward to 2022

The value and resilience of the Wimmera River is enhanced to better withstand future floods.

Riparian waterway frontage fencing work done with farmers during the past decade means high-flow channels like Datchak and Sheepwash creeks have become important biodiversity hotspots, harbouring native fish and containing vegetation that provides great habitat for birds.

Floods continue to benefit areas like the Barrabool, Darlot and Dooen swamps while having reduced financial impacts on the community thanks to improved preparedness and understanding of flood behaviour through various flood investigations.

Environmental water fast facts

- Regulated environmental water releases are prioritised based on the total volume of water in storage and desired outcomes. Objectives change depending on the climate and water availability - from protecting key refuges in drought to facilitating the dispersal, diversity and abundance of native plants and animals during wetter times.
- The best ecological intentions are always the key driver for decision making on where environmental water flows should go.

- Priority is often given to waterways with the highest values of threatened and iconic species such as catfish for example.
- Priority is also given to waterways where fish and vegetation communities are in a good condition to ensure they remain in good condition.
- These high priority waterways also attract strong community involvement to enhance their values through activities such as fencing, revegetation and weed control - what happens alongside a river has a direct impact on what happens within a river.