

## RRAT committee hearing notes

### Opening Statement

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to appear before you.

The River Lakes and Coorong Action Group is an independent community-based organisation with a diverse membership of irrigators, fishers, farmers, small business owners, white collar professionals and environmentalists who live below Lock 1 around Lake Alexandrina, Lake Albert and the Coorong, brought together in the first place by the effects of overallocation upstream during the drought of 2006 and the threat of a weir at Wellington. The group includes the whole range of political affiliations but is united in its commitment to a healthy working river for all Australians.

RLCAG has a 10 year track record of engaging with Murray Darling Basin matters through some 20 submission, symposia, meetings and campaigns.

### Overall position

Our position is as stated in the RLCAG submission. In summary it is that the Murray Darling Basin Plan must be implemented on time and in full and rigorously regulated.

In this opening statement I would like to say that the **members express clear feelings**. These are:

#### **A sense of frustration at having to say the same thing over and over again.**

1. **Everything is connected.** People have said to me that they are tired of reiterating that the health of the system as a whole depends on interconnected flows down all the tributaries, most recently spelled out at the Murray Bridge Fish and Flows forum by Ian Ellis and Chris Bice. The Lower Darling is an important breeding ground for fish throughout the Basin. Flows from the Darling in autumn are critical for fish breeding in the Lakes and Coorong.
2. This is **predominantly a freshwater system** - core samples from the bed of Lake Alexandrina show that it has been a freshwater system for thousands of years running into an estuarine system at the Mouth, and the health of the River Lakes and Coorong in this region depends on freshwater flows out the Mouth 99%, which is what happened historically. This is actually legislated in the Basin Plan but it has not happened yet.
3. **RAMSAR** There are 16 wetlands in the 1.061 million-km<sup>2</sup> MDB system listed under the international RAMSAR treaty. Lakes Alexandrina and Albert, the Coorong and surrounding tributary rivers, are recognised for their remarkable diversity and 'spectacular' populations of migratory shorebirds, which are the subject of international agreements with China, Japan and the Republic of Korea. The Australian Government is the signatory to the RAMSAR treaty, not the states whom the federal government has made responsible for management of the sites.
4. **Misinformation continues.** Under the present government, we saw the re-emergence of pre-Plan misinformation actually being promoted by the Leyonhjelm Committee of Inquiry into the Murray Darling Basin Plan in 2015-2016, three years after the Basin Plan had been legislated
  1. No 1 is probably misinformation about **removing the barrages** and putting in a weir at Wellington - misinformation that is widely known as coming out of 'guns for hire' research paid for by irrigation lobbyists in NW NSW and Qld. Surely no government would entertain this - it would result in a massive ecological disaster and basically the destruction of all the industries, businesses and towns in this region. It is vital for the health of the system that the Murray pumps **2 million tonnes of salt** out the mouth every year. The Wentworth Group of Scientists report of June 2017 *Five Actions necessary to deliver the Murray Darling Basin Plan 'in full and on time'* points out that this is not yet happening.
  2. No 1 A is that Lakes Alexandrina and Albert do not **evaporate** like a large puddle. This is shown in the CSIRO Report of 2008 by Jannet, Webster, Stenson and Sherman : *Estimating Open Water Evaporation for the Murray Darling Basin Plan - Report to the Australian Government from the CSIRO Murray Darling Basin Sustainable Yields Project*. Lake Alexandrina has a surface area of 649 km<sup>2</sup> at an average depth of 3m going down to

6m, and stores 1,610 Gl of water. Because it is such large body of water located in a mild temperate climate the rate of evaporation is low - CSIRO modelling shows a rate of 1060 mm compared with the Hume Dam rate of 1075 mm, with actually 'reverse evaporation' in the months May to July. I found this figure surprising so I checked the figure with one of the RLCAG members who is a retired meteorologist. He emailed me this morning to say : *I am comfortable with the estimates for Lake Alex/Albert, - particularly Kowticky ....he used real data, real measurements from a plane flying over the Lakes. ... That the Hume dam estimate is similar to here is probably reasonable. Its cold water probably reduces evaporation rates .... Rates at Renmark and Mildura are likely to be up to twice what they are here. He added: Another thought... A lot of this research is done on "average" years and if you do this you get good average data results. What we really want to know is how the models and research handle the 10 or 15 worst years in a century. Evaporation may well be less in a drought in that the dams/lakes are of smaller areal extent and so they lose less water. If anyone were to say, "Oh well its hotter in a drought year", then the response is "Show me - We would like to know". What I really want is to prevent another disaster and I want the research to allow us to understand what's going on to try to alleviate this happening again.*

3. I was tempted to call this point **Water flows downhill**. We still hear the misconception that people in NSW and Victoria are missing out because South Australia wastes water, that somehow water used above the border is used more gainfully. The work of Dr Anne Jensen shows that 7% of the people in the Murray Darling Basin live in South Australia, that SA uses only 7% of Murray Darling Basin flows, and yet these flows support more than 3,000 km<sup>2</sup> floodplains and 1100 wetlands, 35,000 ha of irrigated horticulture in the Riverland, 16 towns and 6 settlements, businesses, agriculture and tourism, keeps the river flowing to the sea, supports ecosystems that filter water, trap sedate and nutrients and buffer floods, and kickstart the life cycles in plants, birds, animals, fish, frogs and yabbies.
4. We, the people around the lower River, Lakes and Coorong, keep saying that **We need the Plan implemented on time and in full**. The Murray Darling Basin Plan is regarded as a hard won compromise for people in this region, who are well aware that the best available science at the time recommended the return of 7,000 GL of water to the environment, then 4,000 with complementary supply and efficiency measures, but the Plan legislated 3,200 Gl of water and appears to be stalled at 2,100 GL with no clear prospect for the return of the remaining water. The Murray Darling Basin eco-system is still fragile and it will take years for the system to achieve sustainability.

Those are the points that people keep reiterating.

**More recently, there has been an escalating sense of outrage** at what people are openly labelling as corruption that seems to be blocking the effective implementation of the Basin Plan, from the office of the erstwhile Water Minister down. There are five separate inquiries happening with calls for a full judicial inquiry into water management in the Murray Darling Basin.

There are deep concerns about the current ICAC investigations into the evidently partisan relationships of the NSW government and government officials with Barwon-Darling irrigators and National Party donors.

*[ 27 oct Andrew Clennell The Aus:*

*ICAC has begun a preliminary investigation into whether NSW public officials favoured Nationals donor and irrigator Peter Harris by not prosecuting him over alleged water theft.*

*The Independent Commission Against Corruption is also investigating whether public officials made decisions in favour of western NSW irrigator and lobbyist Ian Cole by changing water sharing arrangements to benefit him.*

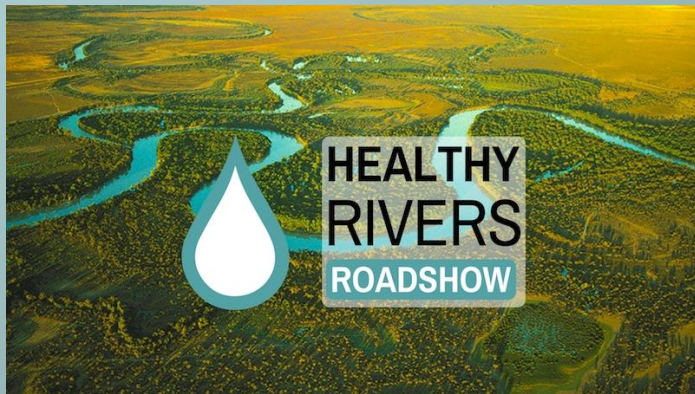
*A day after The Australian revealed that the corruption watchdog was investigating a case where Multicultural Affairs Minister Ray Williams wrote to Primary Industries Minister Niall Blair asking for prosecutorial action against constituent Garry Bugeja to be dropped, it has emerged that the NSW government is facing a series of inquiries over its water policies.]*

## **2. People are saying:**

1. How dare the supposed Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Water make a videoed statement in a pub in Shepparton that he had “ taken water and put it back into agriculture, so we can look after you and make sure greenies aren’t running the show” some days after the revelations of the 4 Corners investigation into removal of water from the system?
2. Why did the federal government pay \$78m for Tandou water entitlements when the place did not even have 100% access to this water? Why did the payment include \$40m in compensation to Webster Limited? The word in the paddock around there is that the Tandou water is worthless.
3. How come Chris Lamey is out of pocket \$1.5 million in lost crops and \$300,000 spent on legal fees, while his neighbour Norman Farming has pocketed \$25 million in subsidies through the Healthy Headwaters project.

Overall, it seems that ordinary people who believe that in Australia everyone is entitled to a fair go, are dismayed and disillusioned by the culture of neo-liberalism /rationalist economics which sees everything in a political context where there is no right and wrong, only winners and losers, and anything goes so long as you win. This is a very short term view, and it is deeply concerning to see Australia’s greatest asset treated like a concrete pipeline to win votes for politicians who are actually not representing the interests of the people who elected them - present company excepted of course.

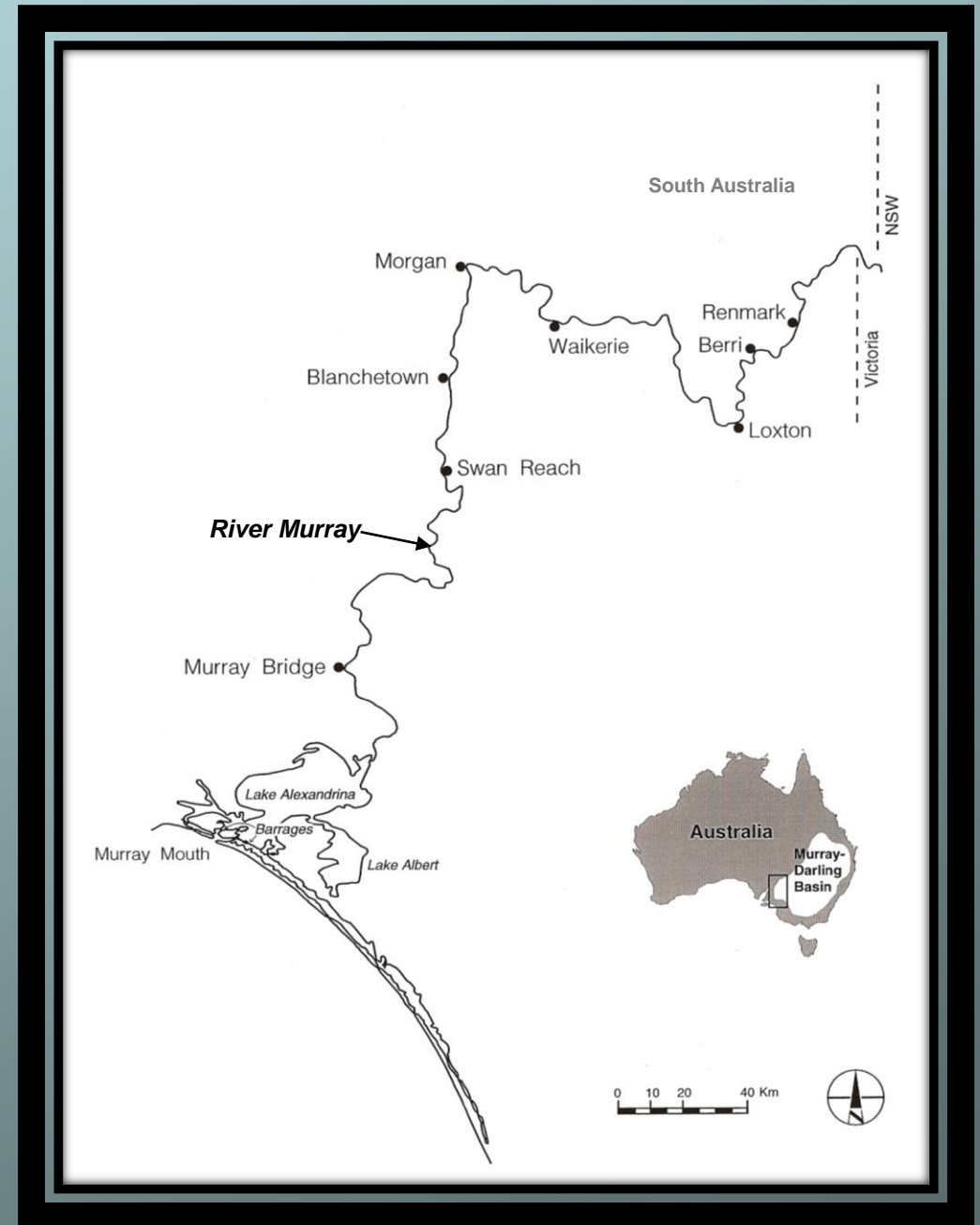
# Keeping Murray-Darling rivers healthy to support Basin communities



Dr Anne Jensen  
Healthy Rivers Ambassador

# *Lower Murray Valley in SA depends on a healthy working River Murray*

- 648 km from SA border to Murray Mouth
- >3,000 km<sup>2</sup> floodplains, 1100 wetlands in 250 complexes
- 16 towns, 6 settlements, 8 holiday home communities, 5 towns on Lower Lakes
- 35,000 ha irrigated horticulture in Riverland
- landscapes, destinations and amenity for river towns, businesses, farmers, fishermen and holiday-makers
- only 7% of MDB area and flows





healthy rivers for healthy communities

# Water flowing to SA is not wasted!

- provides water supplies to 75% of SA communities in dry years, including Adelaide, Iron Triangle, Yorke Peninsula, Barossa, Clare, Keith
- supports towns, communities, businesses, agriculture, tourism & State's economy
- keeps the River flowing to the Lower Lakes, Coorong and the sea
- ecosystems filter water, trap sediment and nutrients, buffer floods
- floods water floodplains and wetlands, kick-start life-cycles in plants, birds, animals, fish, frogs, yabbies

# Murray-Darling Rivers are changed & stressed

## *Effects of river regulation, upstream dams & extraction since 1920s:*

- no small floods (used to be every 2-3 years)
- fewer, shorter, smaller, later large floods
- drier, smaller floodplain

## *Millenium Drought 2000-2010:*

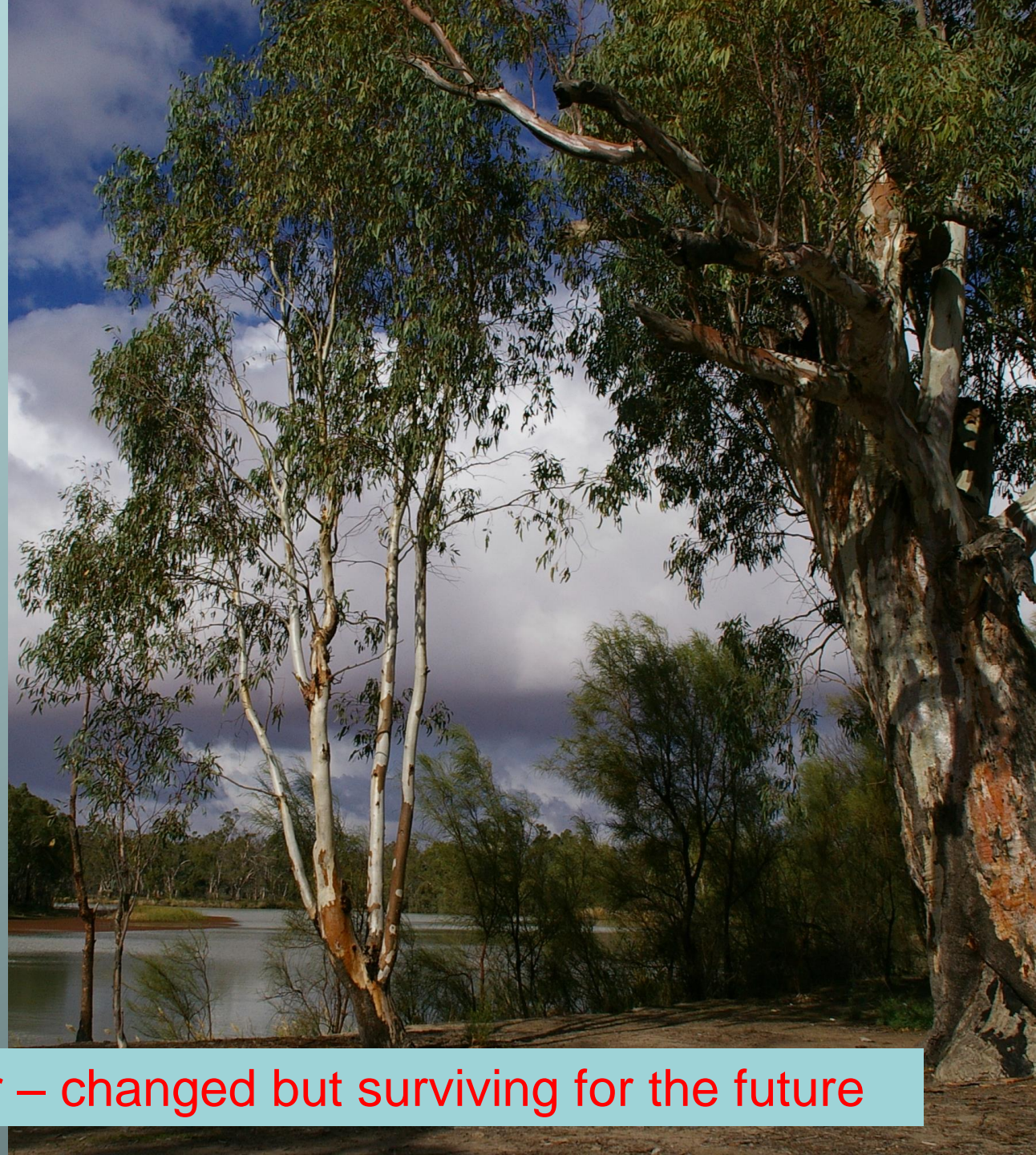
- no over-bank flows for 14 years
- no breeding or regeneration
- extensive death & decline in floodplain woodlands & shrublands, millions of red gum and black box dead
- Lower Lakes below sea level, increased salinity
- no flows to sea or Coorong



# A changed river system

- River now a series of stable pools, favours carp & willows
- lost wetting & drying cycles, flow pulses
- fewer boom regeneration & breeding events
- harder for native fish to migrate past weirs & barrages
- lost flowing habitats for Murray cod, silver perch, catfish
- crayfish extinct in SA Murray, yabbies moved into River
- floodplains accumulate salt, nutrients, debris, don't get flushed often enough
- lost estuary and passage to sea

best achievable is healthy working river – changed but surviving for the future





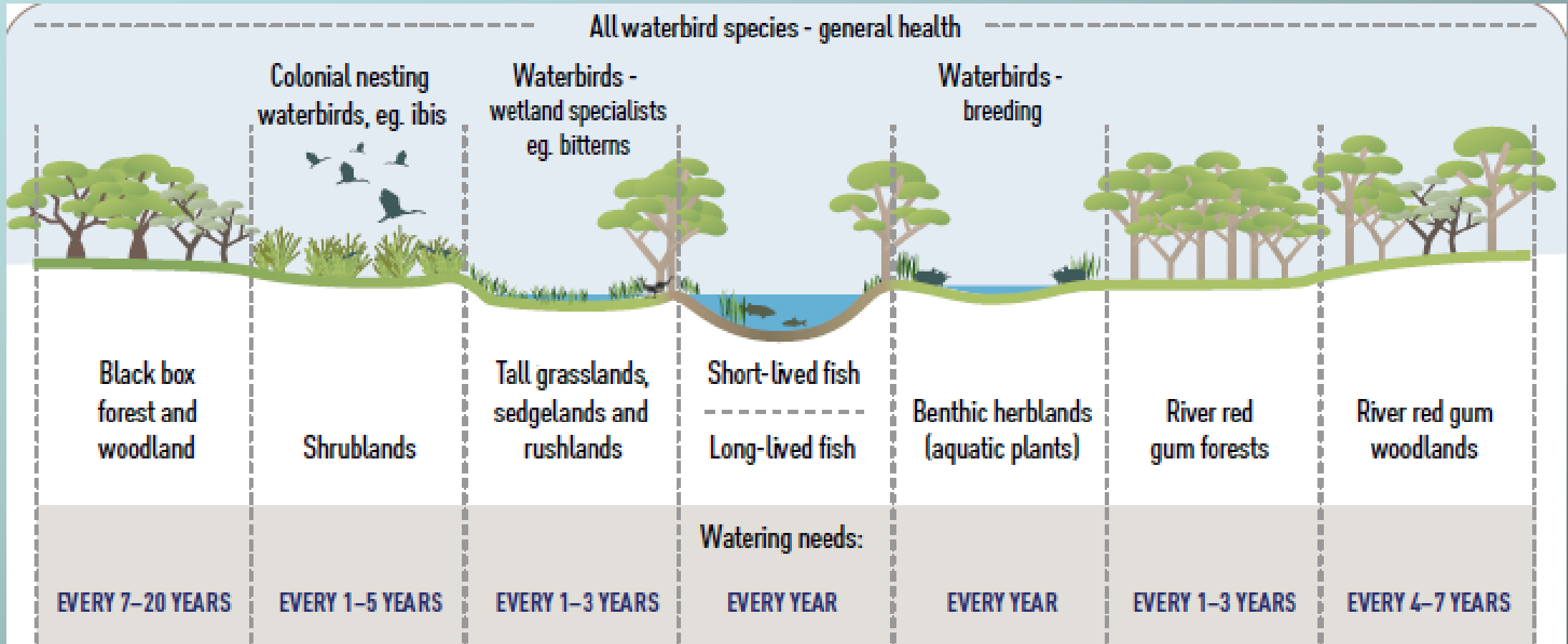


New seedlings since 2011 flood  
but large numbers mature trees dead

## River Murray Ecosystems still in Recovery

- ecology adapted to droughts & floods, works on boom & bust cycles
- floods have been removed/reduced, less able to withstand droughts
- fewer successful regeneration & breeding events, big age gaps in populations
- extreme damage from Millenium drought, still recovering
- floods in 2010-12 and 2016 saved us, but not recovered yet
- not ready yet to withstand next drought

# Returning Water – where and how?



Not just set annual volume, accumulate, apply in pulses, piggy-back on Nature

# Water being returned to Environment since 2004

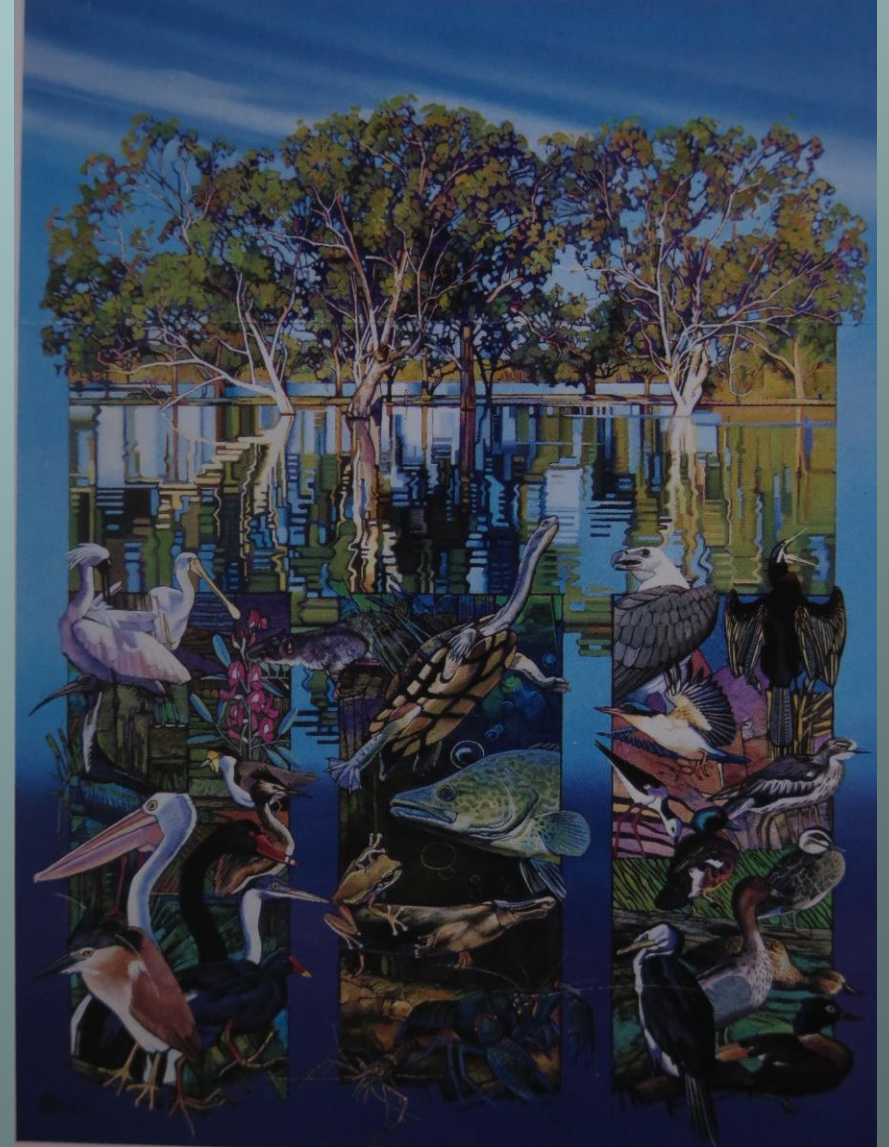
## *Water needed in pulses and 'lumps':*

- add extra water to wetlands to extend time wetted & increase depth
- add water to river flows to reach further onto floodplain, run through floodplain creeks, fill more wetlands for longer
- pump water into wetlands in spring in dry years to replace missing small floods, timing for frogs and waterbird chicks
- water germinated seedlings through dry summers
- add flows through barrages for fish and migratory waders



# One Environmental Watering Success Story!

- lack of flows 2014-16 threatened loss of lower Darling River fish populations in key nursery area, especially callop
- environmental flows transferred to create low flows in spring 2016, then increased to create food sources and sites for larvae
- rain-fed river flows continued to allow fish to grow and migrate
- environmental flows saved key nursery area and Darling fish population able to migrate to other Basin rivers



no river, no people, no life

*Dr Anne Poelina, Kimberley Elder at International Rivers Symposium*



# Need MDB Plan to secure future water for environment

- Murray-Darling rivers evolved with all the water!
- now have <40% of water, less floods, less variability
- need *healthy working rivers* to support all river communities
- need to return enough water to support life cycles & processes
- ensure 'genuinely equivalent ecological outcomes'
- *need MDB Plan as framework to make that happen!*



environmental flows essential for healthy rivers