

OH 61/2 - Interview with Doug Hattan

TAPE 1, SIDE B - Trees and birdlife

In the time you've been on the Murray, what other changes have you seen? For instance, have you seen changes in any plants or trees?

Yes. The river red gums, they have more-or-less died out in lagoons and things like that where they'd only get a drink when the high river came up, and now of course, when the locks were put in, the water was banked back, and those that were standing in water, of course, have died, and they've been drowned and you can see that practically wherever there's a lagoon, where the water never dries out, and the gums have just collapsed, or box trees also. I don't think it's only the water, I think it's the build-up of salt. Also when you get a dry period, say two or three years, you may not get a high river, and you'll see that the box trees and the gums get a very blue sort of a look about them, they're not a nice healthy green, and I think this is because the salt content is building up. In some areas where there used to be good grazing land now it's been salted all out, and it's just bare mud.

Apart from the changes to the trees then, you've seen good land go to waste.

See most of the river flats have been – well, I think the only thing they're any good for is grazing, mostly sheep, a few cattle, but nearly all the sheep. The flats don't carry the number of sheep as what they used to now because the couch grass has taken over a lot, in a lot of areas. Maybe it's a good thing because sheep'll live on that anyway, and it seems to be fairly salt tolerant.

Have you noticed any changes in any of the other animals, like birds, birdlife?

Well there used to be always pelicans down there on the reach, and now the last years I've said to my friend, "You never see pelicans down here now – they seemed to have disappeared. Where have they gone?" Same with the cormorants – there used to be a build-up there in the Pyap Lagoon of cormorants – they used to nest there. I haven't been around that way for a good while, I don't know whether they're still nesting there or not, but you don't see very many cormorants on the river. When I was down at the fruit block on the top end of the reach, about this time of the year, the pelicans and the cormorants used to migrate down the river, and there would be anything around, well, what'll I say, three or four pelicans there, and a thousand cormorants, and they used to fish together. They

used to go down the river, I suppose a couple of mile, and these shags'd dive all the way down, and the pelicans'd swim on top of the water – any fish that come up the top, of course the pelicans would get. Then they'd turn around and they'd all fly back to the sand bar just opposite the block, and dry themselves out again. That's what they used to do, and they'd stop there for anything around a month and then they'd move on down the river a bit.

And you saw this for several years?

This used to happen every year, every June or July, and now I haven't seen a white-breasted cormorant for I reckon two or three years down there now. You get one now and again, or a black one, or something like that, but you'd see them in flocks.

And that was when there was a high river?

Anytime – all the year round they used to be there, the cormorants – not so much the pelicans. There might be p'raps the ten or a dozen pelicans might hang around, but the cormorants they'd be all there sitting up in trees. But no, not now. The ducks are not as plentiful in the river what they used to be, they've disappeared

From the main channel?

They are more-or-less in the backwaters, the ducks like the lagoons and creeks and things like that. Black ducks used to – this time of the year you'd find black ducks along the banks of the river, but teal and wood-duck and things like that, well, they'd be back on the lagoons and creeks and things like that. They'd be there. No, I don't know, it's really changed altogether. The duck populations used to – like I was just saying the pelicans and the shags – they used to migrate down the river, and they reckon they used to start right up in New South Wales, work their way right down the river, into the Coorong, and that was their cycle every year. They reckon they used to work their way down to the Coorong and for the nesting period, and then they'd take off again and go up into New South Wales and Queensland, and then work down through the rivers again. I've seen that happen, I've seen often years that was fairly slack duck season, and then all of sudden the last month of the season, in June, you'd see them, there'd be mobs on the river, going down the river again.

How long is it since you've seen that?

I reckon, ten to fifteen years