

OH 679 - Interview with Tony Sharley

TAPE 1, SIDE B - Historical overview of environmental problems

So with the wetlands, what has it entailed to actually rehabilitate the wetlands – like was it a terrible mess that was rehabilitated, or were they sort of good wetlands to start with?

They really weren't good – well, there were good wetlands here two hundred years ago and a hundred and fifty years ago, and in probably – I'd say from the 1850s it really all started to go downhill a bit. Sheep became the land use in the 1850s on Banrock, so sheep grazing on the floodplains with access to water in the River Murray, so you can imagine that first wave of pressure in terms of grazing on flood plains started then. And then, from the 1860s through to the 1920s there was a paddle steamer industry on the Murray, and at the peak of the industry there were two hundred boats burning about a ton of wood every hour, and they were burning red gum for fuel, they were making the barges out of red gums, they made the paddle steamers themselves out of red gum, and the colonies of South Australia and New South Wales and Victoria built these de-snagging boats that actually got into the Murray and pulled out all the old red gums that had fallen into the river and were like the reefs in the ocean in terms of fish habitat. So the whole paddle steamer era, whilst it was a pretty romantic sort of era, you know – and *All the rivers run* sort of conveyed that with all that lovely imagery of a paddle steamer chuffing up the river, people wearing long white gowns sort of being transported along the river – at the end of the day they burned a lot of red gums and removed a lot of timber off the floodplains and a lot of habitat out of the river for fish.

1888 the rabbit arrived in this region, and really probably every bilby that was in a burrow was then either displaced by a rabbit that aggressively took over their burrows, or they just couldn't find food because the rabbits basically were referred to as 'the living drought' – they mowed everything on the ground so there was very little food left for any other grazing animal, including sheep. So pretty tough times when the rabbit arrived. And then in 1925 the weirs were built along the river – Lock 3 and Weir 3 were built on the Murray just opposite Banrock – and that raised the river level by three metres and pushed water into the wetland. Full-time. So it no longer got to dry out like a natural river dries and floods. And it also brought the salt levels up under the floodplain, so salty water rose under the floodplains killing trees. Trees were obviously inundated by water and therefore drowned, which is why some of the dead trees that you see on Banrock are dead - because they drowned, not killed by salt. That was the 1920s.

And then probably 1950s there was a whole lot of mallee cut for the old steam engine pumps for the irrigation areas around here, and homes in the Riverland that burned mallee in their stoves.

1969 the European carp arrived, as if that wasn't enough, and just really belted all the aquatic plants in these wetlands. Didn't need floods to spawn. Fish that could lay half a million to a million eggs possibly twice a year, and they just took over and displaced native fish, and removed habitat that other species needed, like snails lost those submergent aquatic plants which were totally uprooted by carp, which sort of explains why there's about eighteen species of native snails that are thought to be extinct in the Lower Murray. So pretty tough times.

When the lock was built there was a road built from Kingston across to the weir, straight across the Banrock floodplain, and instead of putting culverts into the road where it crossed little creeks, you know, it just blocked them. So when there were floods the water couldn't – or small floods – the water couldn't run through the floodplain any more. So salt accumulated, seed wasn't able to be transported in, any cover that was there the rabbits and the sheep got.