

OH 679 - Interview with Tony Sharley

TAPE 2, SIDE A - Current environmental problems

There are many problems on the Murray River, and whilst the Murray's created opportunity for many people to basically develop crops and establish communities and generations within communities, we've also created, if you like, a dependence on the river that is not sustainable. And so, really, probably the last decade is where the problems have become most obvious. We've over-committed the river in terms of its water resources, we haven't got the flows coming down the river that used to come down through the river and spill out onto the floodplains and give the trees a drink and flush salts and create spawning triggers for fish and invertebrates and that type of thing. So today we've got a river that's a lot drier. We've got floodplains that are a lot drier, we've got floodplains that are under stress because they haven't got as much water on them. We've got extensive areas of red gums that are dying or have died, we've got a thousand kilometres of river where eighty per cent of the red gums are under stress – that's pretty sad. And I've seen all this change in my lifetime. We've got fish that are no longer in the sort of numbers that they were, and we've got European carp which are loving living in an environment that is now much more stable, that doesn't dry out and flood and dry out and flood – they love these permanent lakes that we've created by all these weirs and locks and so on. And so – you know, and all the other things I mentioned earlier just exacerbate the problem in terms of feral animals, feral plants, feral fish and so on. And probably even in some cases feral people, (laughs) where we've got a bit too much pressure on the river system in terms of tourism and the like with boating and whatnot.

Nevertheless, the big issue with the Murray today is the lack of water flowing down it. And it's that lack of water flowing down that is responsible for less fish, less healthy trees, Murray Mouth closing over or wanting to close over or there being a very expensive dredge kept down there to keep it open. And so again, within this Murray-Darling Basin Commission environment, there has been a very, very extensive and intensive study of the science, to understand what will happen to this river if nothing is done. And the science clearly indicates that if we don't increase the flow of water down this river and increase the frequency of flooding, then the river is going to die. And so hence, how much water does the river need? There's been lots of debate about that, and through numerous scientists contributing their expertise – and not their emotion; their expertise – to this, we now understand that unless the river can get another 1500 gigitalitres back into the system that is effectively not flowing down the system today because it's been taken out of the river, we're going to – we'll have no chance of recovering the river. And even with 1500

gigalitres there's only a moderate chance of recovery.

So of course we've just heard that there's been a first-step decision made by the Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council – courageous decision, a really exciting decision about the future of the river – the first-step decision was to allocate 500 million dollars to the increase, to increase flow down the river system, and to increase the flow by at least 500 gigalitres in the first instance. So it may take four or five years to acquire 500 gigalitres and then to manage it for environmental flows, but the first step has been taken. And it may be 15 years before we recover 1500 gigalitres through various mechanisms; nevertheless, the process has started and everyone in Australia, the coalition of Australian governments – so that's governments from all over Australia – as well as the Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council, recognise that the Murray needs more flow. And so that's very exciting, very exciting. I just hope that in my lifetime, as I've seen it degrade in my lifetime, I hope that I see in my lifetime signs of it recovering, and that will be very satisfying. And I think in some ways Banrock has played a small part in that, along with many other people who've also been vocal and have demonstrated what has happened to their floodplain in their lifetime and made it real to politicians and those people who actually make the decisions.