



# *The Gift of* **WATER**



A Statement from Catholic Earthcare Australia  
endorsed by Bishops of the Murray-Darling Basin



This painting by Tex Skuthorpe represents Indigenous and non Indigenous Australians working together to improve the health of the Narran-Culgoa River basin in north western NSW, near the Queensland border. This is the traditional land of the Noonbahburra people located within the Murray-Darling Basin.

In 1999 part of this region, including the Narran Lakes was listed as a Ramsar Wetlands of International Importance. It provides essential habitat to many migratory birds and native species. Water flowing to the Narran Lakes wetland catchment originates in the Condamine, Balonne and Maranoa Rivers in Queensland.

The painting portrays the floodplain and the ecosystems of the area. To the right is Lake Narran with the Narran River entering it. To the left is Lake Corcoran in red, and further to the left is Lake Angeloo.

The different coloured hands at the top represent people from different cultures working together. The four emus and goannas represent spirit and totem animals.

The blue and red circles show how the water spreads through the creeks and valleys during flood. The smaller circles linked by lines show the groups who inhabited the plains and the pathways that connected them. The smaller red circles within the blue circles identify special areas where languages were spoken, initiations conducted and corroborees held. The pink represents the sacred places. Red and yellow circles show traditional agricultural practices, particularly the use of fire to stimulate growth. The fish are cod and yellow belly.

In the words of the artist, "the purpose of the painting is to evoke the floodplain and show its systemic nature, to communicate the traditional context and to link all that to the task of working together for the good of the land and rivers.

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1.47.1; *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 2.45.2; Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, 2.12; *Itinerarium*, 1.15.

<sup>2</sup> *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis: On Social Concerns* (Homebush, NSW: St Paul Publications, 1988), par. 34, p.74.

<sup>3</sup> *Peace with God the Creator; Peace with All of Creation* (Homebush, NSW: St Paul Publications, 1990), p. 5. This is Pope John Paul II's *Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Prayer for Peace* (1 January 1990), par. 6.

<sup>4</sup> *The Gospel of Life: Evangelium Vitae* (Homebush, NSW: St Pauls, 1995), par. 42, p. 80. See also *Centesimus Annus: On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum* (Homebush, NSW: St. Paul Publications, 1991), par. 37-38; pp.70-72.

<sup>5</sup> This is an expression of Pope John Paul II used in his General Audience Address, 17 January 2001, and taken up by the Australian Catholic Bishops' 2002 Social Justice Statement *A New Earth: The Environmental Challenge* (Melbourne: Ben Hider/ Jesuit Publications, 2002). This theme has been adopted by Catholic Earthcare Australia in a number of ways, particularly in its educational video, *The Garden Planet*.

<sup>6</sup> This phrase was used by Pope John Paul II in his address given at the Angelus, Castel Gandolfo, Sunday 25 August 2002.

<sup>7</sup> Declaration on Environment signed by Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople, Italy, 11 June 2002.

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Photos appear courtesy of OzGreen, Gill Baker, Murray Darling Basin Commission, CSIRO Land & Water, CSIRO Science Images Online, Department of Environment & Heritage, River Murray Urban Users, Ecopix Images, ANTphotography and Arthur Mostead.

## Introduction

The rivers of the Murray-Darling Basin bring life wherever they flow, from outback Queensland to the Murray Mouth, from the Snowy Mountains to flat Mallee plains. On their journeys they travel through a wide range of climate zones: alpine, sub-tropical, temperate and arid. The Murray-Darling Basin

is a place of flood plains, wetlands and ancient River red gum forests, of pelicans, ibis, swans, parrots, blue wrens and kingfishers. It

provides habitats for native frogs, turtles, lizards, yabbies, Murray cray and a variety of unique fish, including the Macquarie perch and the great Murray cod.

Much of the food that feeds our nation is grown by the farming families that live and work in the Murray-Darling Basin. For them, and for many other Australians, the rivers are places of peace and renewal. They are centres of community life. Many find the rivers and wetlands to be locations where they experience a sense of God's presence. The Murray-Darling Basin is widely recognised as a region that is critically important in economic, cultural and ecological terms. We will point, as well, to its deep spiritual importance.

This beautiful part of our country is becoming degraded and its rivers are in poor health. The indications include high salt levels, severe algal blooms in weir pools, the constant need to dredge the Murray Mouth, the death of River red gums, loss of fish and bird habitats,

the growing lists of endangered species, and the threat posed to irrigation and to water supplies for our towns and cities. The restoration of the health of the Murray and the other rivers of the Basin is one of the most urgent issues facing our country. We are glad to say that it has been taken up vigorously by



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numbers of landholders, scientists, community leaders, environmental groups and politicians.

We respect the enormous amount of community work already done. But we believe that all Australians need to become involved. As bishops, we would like to add our voices in support of the rivers and all those working to save them. In a particular way we want to reflect on the Murray-Darling Basin from the perspective of Christian faith. We see its life-giving waters as a precious gift of God. We see human beings as responsible before God for the well-being of the river system.

**"...we see its life-giving waters as a precious gift of God..."**



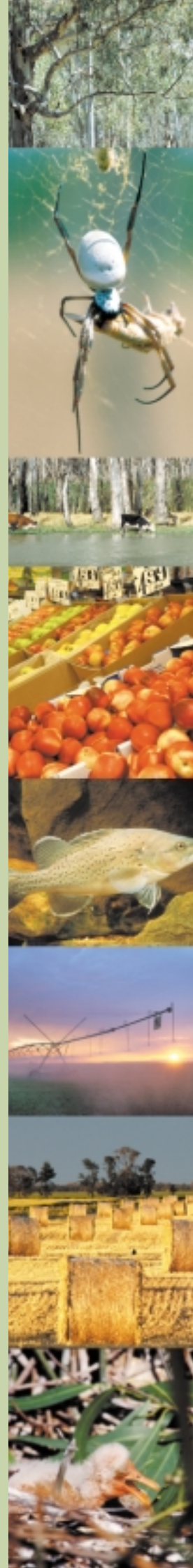
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## The Murray-Darling Basin



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“...the Basin  
directly  
supports a  
population of  
about 2  
million  
people...”

The Murray-Darling Basin extends over more than a million square kilometres, representing about 14 percent of the total area of Australia. It includes parts of Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory. It is made up of the flat central plains that rise up on their eastern side to the Great Dividing Range and to Mt Kosciusko.

The longest continuous length of water in the Basin runs for 3750 kilometres. It starts at the source of the Condamine, a little over 100 kilometres from Brisbane, and ends at the Murray mouth at Goolwa, south-east of Adelaide.

Three groups of rivers flow through the Basin, meeting in the waters of the lower Murray. The Darling is the longest river in the country.

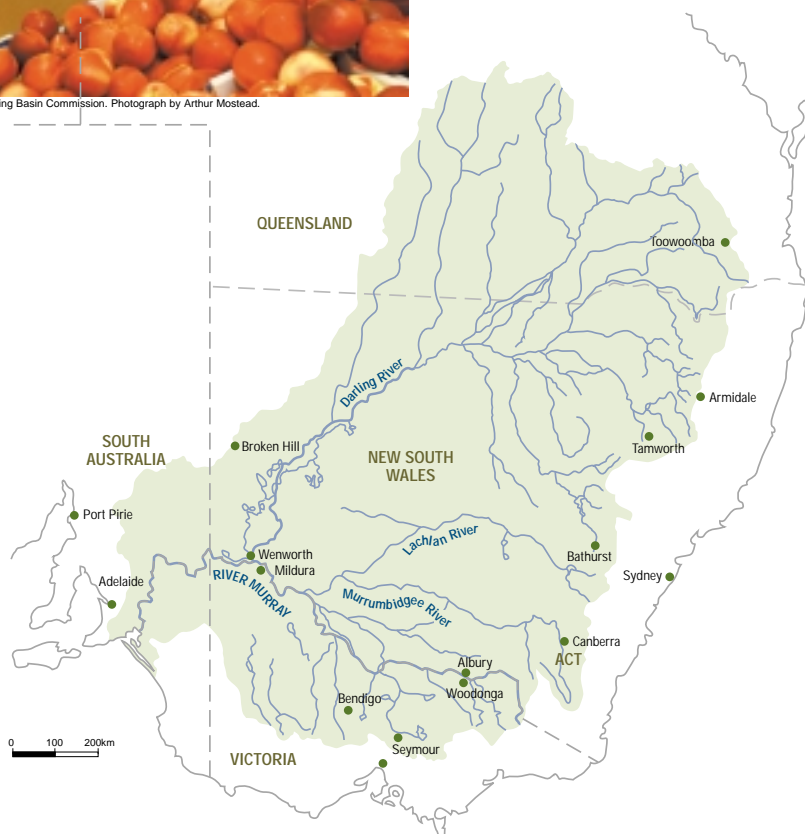
With its tributaries, it drains from the north and contributes about 10 percent of the flow of the Murray. The Murrumbidgee, with the Lachlan River and other tributaries, drains the centre of the Basin. The Murrumbidgee provides about 14 percent of the flow of the lower Murray. Coming from the south-east, the Murray and its tributaries bring about 75 percent of the flow. Much of the catchment area contributes little to the rivers. While the north contributes important summer rain, most water comes from winter rains in the mountains and hills of the south east rim of the Basin.

The Murray-Darling Basin is the most important agricultural region in Australia. It includes half of our crop-land and produces about 41 percent of our agriculture. It contains more than half of our orchards and produces three quarters of our irrigated crops, half of our sheep and about 30 percent of our cattle. The Basin directly supports a population of about 2 million people.

The Murray is a major source of water for more than a million and a quarter people living outside the Basin in South Australia. Pipelines supply households and industries in Adelaide, Port Pirie, Whyalla, Port Augusta, Woomera, and the towns and farms of Yorke Peninsula and the Mid-North of South Australia, as well as Broken Hill in New South Wales. In a normal year the Murray supplies about 40 percent of Adelaide's water. In a drought year this can rise to more than 85 percent.



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# The story of the Murray-Darling Basin

## The forging of its landscape

The Murray-Darling Basin is a very old system. Its origins go back well before Australia was separated from the super-continent Gondwana about 45 million years ago. The Basin started to emerge in its present

form about 100 million years ago, as the mountains of the Great Dividing Range began to rise, and the basin west of the divide began to subside. Large rivers flowed west depositing sediment washed down from the mountains and hills.

For long periods over the last 40 million years, the south-west of the system was covered by the sea. Over millions of years the sea advanced and then retreated. About 6 million years ago, as the sea withdrew, a river found a route through what is now South Australia to the Southern Ocean. About

3 million years ago, this route to the ocean was blocked near Swan Reach by an uplift called the Padthaway Block, forming a huge fresh water lake, Lake Bungunnia, before the river again found its way to the sea.

Because of a bottleneck caused by the Cadell Fault, the Murray routinely broke its banks into a wide flood plain, creating Australia's largest River red gum forest, known as the Barmah-Milewa forest.



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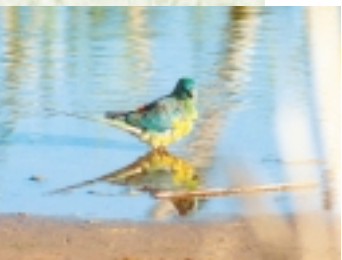
The whole  
Earth is a  
living icon  
of the face  
of God.

St John

Damascene



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## Indigenous occupation

Human beings have long lived along the rivers of the Basin. Here as elsewhere in Australia, Aboriginal people learned to live within the limits of the land. There is evidence of indigenous culture going back more than 40,000 years at Lake Mungo in south-western New South Wales. At Lake

Victoria, also in New South Wales, lowering the water level in 1994 led to the discovery of a permanent Aboriginal township and of burial sites dating back 8000 years. Lake Victoria is a place of cultural importance for the Barkindji people and for the whole of Australia.

The Murray River, with its tributaries and flood plains, was one of the most densely populated areas in Australia. Large numbers of people lived in the area around what is now the

Barmah State Forest. Here the Yorta Yorta and other communities travelled the river in bark canoes and lived a rich cultural and economic life,

hunting for fish, shellfish, water birds, eggs, goannas, kangaroos and emus, and collecting berries, root, seeds and quandongs. Near the Murray Mouth, the Ngarrindjeri had strongly developed cultural traditions and abundant sources of food from the Murray, its lakes, the Coorong and the Southern Ocean. They lived on river fish, turtles and birds, on fish and shellfish from the sea, and in winter, on the emus, kangaroos, wallabies and birds of the Mallee. There are about 10,000 sites of activity or occupation in the Murray-Darling Basin. Indigenous cultural centres along the rivers now celebrate this history and culture.



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## The last two hundred years

In the last two hundred years the Murray-Darling Basin has continued to have a central place in Australia's culture. This more recent story of the Basin involves the journeys of the explorers, the settlements west of the Great Dividing Range, the gold rushes, the emergence of rural communities and new towns, and the paddle steamers that provided transport on the Murray, Murrumbidgee and Darling rivers. The Murray-Darling Basin is part of the history of federation, with Sir Henry Parkes' speech at Tenterfield in 1889 and the Federation Conference at Corowa of

1893. Henry Lawson and Banjo Patterson were born in the Basin. It has inspired many of Australia's songs, poems, paintings and films.

The people of the Murray-Darling Basin are known for their independence, creativity, resilience and community life. During the twentieth century they succeeded in using the waters of the Murray-Darling Basin to irrigate crops and they made the Basin a food-producing centre for Australia and beyond.



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## Issues that confront us

In the coming century, our whole global community faces dangerous water shortages. Tragically, many people already suffer because they do not have adequate access to clean drinking water. We Australians live in the driest continent on Earth, experience unpredictable droughts and face the further uncertainty of global climate change. In this context, the health of the Murray and the other rivers of the Basin is a matter of great concern. We have every reason to believe that our rivers are in crisis. While many issues impact on their health, we will focus on two that are of central importance, salinity and river flow

### 1. Salinity

The success of agriculture in the Murray-Darling Basin has come at a largely unforeseen cost. We can now see that there are physical and ecological constraints to agriculture in Australia that are far more severe than those that operate in Europe and many other parts of the world. The Basin is ancient, flat and very salty. Its rivers run slowly. In spite of the dryness of the country, groundwater that is often salty lies close to the surface. The groundwater of the Basin is fundamentally a closed system that drains westward. Apart from the restricted exit of the Murray mouth, there is nowhere for most of it to go.

Native Australian vegetation tends to have deep root systems that enable plants to survive during droughts. These deep-rooted plants extract water from below the surface. Their roots also intercept a good deal of rainwater before it can leak into the groundwater. The shallow-rooted crops introduced by Europeans leak far more rain into the groundwater. And, in irrigation areas, large quantities of irrigation water have drained into the groundwater flow systems. As a result, the water table rises bringing dissolved salt to the surface of the land, or

**“Rivers in the Murray Darling Basin are generally in poor ecological condition...the current level of health is less than what is required for ecological sustainability...if the situation continues to deteriorate the livelihoods of millions of people will be directly threatened, the output of Australia’s agricultural heartlands will wither and many native species of plants and animals may be lost forever.”**

Murray Darling Basin Commission 2003



carrying it sideways into rivers and streams.

All of this has created a long-term problem of enormous complexity. It is important to note that irrigators with good land management practices have succeeded in limiting or reversing the process. Successive governments have invested in important salt interception and drainage programmes. Dryland salinity is a further source of salt discharge that impacts on the health of the Basin and its rivers. The scale of the problem is large and long-term solutions are needed. These will need to involve facing the finite limits of the land itself. The Murray-Darling Basin salinity audit predicts that, without effective intervention, enormous tracts of land could become salinised during the coming century. There is urgent need for government support for salinity control measures, including reafforestation, and the implementation of land management and engineering works in priority areas.



## 2. River flow

We can now see that earlier attempts to manage the rivers have done great harm to the ecosystem of the Murray-Darling Basin. Excessive amounts of water have been extracted for agriculture and for urban

development. Unsustainable industries have been encouraged. Storing winter flow and releasing it in summer has reversed the natural pattern, degrading river banks and damaging wildlife. Levees built to control floods keep the rivers from their floodplains, killing River red gums, and destroying habitats of native fish, bird and animals. Cleaning out snags has meant the loss of habitats for fish and birds. The rivers have been degraded by salt,

chemicals, nutrients and sewerage from catchment areas. River flow has been severely restricted by dams and weirs. If nothing is done about river flow, water in some areas will become unusable for irrigation, for stock and for domestic use.

The good health of a river depends upon its flow. If too much water is extracted and too little flows through the system, the river will

suffer stress and degradation.

Many scientists estimate that a river is liable to show signs of deterioration if its flow is reduced to below two-thirds of its natural level. The median flow of the Murray to the sea is less than a third of its natural level, about 27 percent.

It has become clear that managing the river system must be done on a holistic basis, one that involves not only the lower Murray, but the whole Murray-Darling Basin, and one that involves not only the rivers but also their wetlands and flood plains. It needs to take into account not only economic needs, but also the needs of human communities and the ecological needs of the whole system.

As bishops of the Murray-Darling, we believe that many of the people who live in the Basin support an allocation of water for river flow that can sustain the rivers with their fish, birds and floodplains. They support an environmental allocation even though they know it has economic costs. They recognise that restoring the health of the rivers is vital to the future of agriculture and the rural communities of the region.



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**“Degradation of natural systems occurs because our economy makes it cheaper to degrade Australia than to look after it. The market signals are back to front.”**

Report to the Prime Minister’s Science, Engineering and Innovation Council, 2002.



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## Increasing cooperation

We would like to take this opportunity to recognise and to thank the landholders, scientists, volunteer conservation groups and community leaders who have long been working to restore the health of the rivers. This includes local, state and federal politicians. In many instances there has been community participation and cooperation.

Disputes over the Murray between New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia were one of the incentives for Federation in 1901 and they also delayed its arrival. After Federation, an important community conference on the

Murray was held at Corowa in 1902. This led to the 1915 agreement between the Commonwealth and the three states on the management and sharing of the Murray's water. The River Murray Commission was established in 1917 and

it controlled the allocation of water through much of the 20th Century.

In 1985 the focus was changed to the whole Murray-Darling Basin. The Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council was established to promote the integrated planning and management of the water, land and environmental resources of the whole Basin.

In 1988 the Murray-Darling Basin Commission replaced the River Murray Commission. It serves as the executive arm of the Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council. The Murray-Darling Basin



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Agreement of 1992 now forms the basis for sharing water between the states. The Murray-Darling Association is an important focus for local government and community participation on issues affecting the Basin.

In 1996, the states agreed to cap the quantity of water they diverted for the sake of the good health of the rivers. They opened up trade in water rights in order to encourage the most efficient use of water. In 2001, the Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council launched a strategic vision with an integrated catchment approach, which takes account of environmental and social as well as economic outcomes. In an important pact signed on 25th July 2004, federal and state governments agreed to increase river flow by an initial 500 gegalitres a year and to implement a system of water rights, national water trading and the clawing back of some over-allocated water.

**"Only those who till the land can really testify that the barren earth does not bear fruit, but when cared for lovingly it is a generous provider. May God bless the work of your hands."**

Pope John Paul II,  
1999



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## A vision of the Murray-Darling Basin as the gift of God

Let  
everything  
that breathes  
praise the  
Lord.

Psalms 150:6



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"...we are part  
of the inter-  
connected  
community of  
creation,  
inter-related  
with all other  
creatures..."

As bishops who live and work along the rivers of the Basin we support community and government initiatives aimed at reducing salinity and increasing flow to our rivers. We support these initiatives because we are convinced that the Murray-Darling Basin is a gift we are called to take care of before God.

We see the rivers and all the living creatures that depend upon them as part of God's good creation. In the opening chapters of Genesis, we find the Creator delighting in the diversity of creatures and declaring them to be good: the seas, the dry land, seed-bearing plants, fruit trees, sea creatures, birds, cattle, creeping

things, and wild animals of every kind. We are told that all the fruitfulness of creation springs from the divine blessing. All is God's gift. Translating this to our own time and place, we think of the Creator who takes delight in the Darling, the Murrumbidgee and the

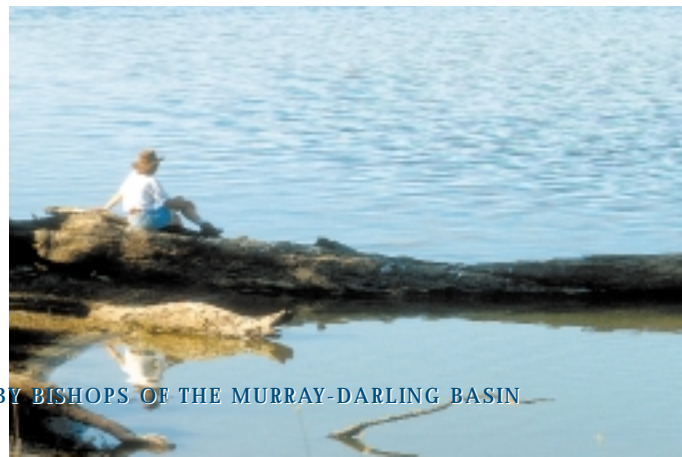
Murray, in native frogs, platypuses, swans and egrets, and declares them good.

What is the place of human beings in relation to the rest of creation? According to the Bible, we too are God's creatures. We are part of the interconnected community of creation, inter-related with all other creatures. As images of God (Gen 1:27) we are called to work with creation, and to do so in such a way as to manifest the love and respect that God has for each creature. We are to be humble stewards before God. We are told "to cultivate and take care" of what God has given (Gen 2:15). As we reflect about this in our own context, we interpret this to mean that our special part of creation, the Murray-Darling Basin, is entrusted to us by God. We are to receive its fruitfulness as God's gift. We are called to be faithful trustees, respecting the integrity of God's creation.

This involves a call to protect the biodiversity of the Murray-Darling Basin. According to the Bible, the diversity of creation not only springs from the hand of God, but gives expression to God: **"O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures"** (Psalm 104:24). God's covenant with Noah embraces all of God's diverse creatures (Gen 9:12-16). Some of the greatest theologians of the church have meditated on the diversity of creatures and have seen this as expressing the abundance of the trinitarian God. According to St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Bonaventure the diversity of species represents the wonder and beauty of God that transcends any one creature.<sup>1</sup> God's creatures express and represent the Trinity. They are not simply there for human use, but have their own dignity, value and integrity. Such a view challenges the destruction of species and their habitats in the modern era.

As we ponder this in relationship to the Murray-Darling Basin, we see the rivers and all their birds, fish and animals as creatures that emerge and are sustained by God's ongoing creation. The loving act of ongoing creation has enabled them to flourish in this place. They are part of a story of ongoing creation that takes place over millions of years. They are God's gift to us. They can communicate something of God to us. We are called to care for them, as fellow creatures before God and as loving and wise stewards of God's creation.

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## Living water

As we reflect on the Murray-Darling river system, we remember that Jesus was baptised in the Jordan River and that much of his life and ministry took place around the inland Sea of Galilee. He preached the good news of God to those who lived from fishing the Sea of Galilee and working the land around it. Pilgrims who spend time in Galilee today often reflect that Jesus would have met the God that he called *Abba* Father as he prayed and worked in its hills and valleys. The creatures of Galilee, its wild flowers, birds, foxes, trees, fish, crops, sheep, goats and its human communities were the basis for Jesus' parables of the Kingdom of God. In a special way Galilee was his place, the place where he



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Murray-Darling Basin is the place of God for us. It is our Galilee, our special place under the Southern Cross. It is a place where we encounter God in quiet moments and are called to live our own vocations before God. As Jesus was nourished by the wild flowers and the birds of Galilee, our spirits are nourished by great River red gums, by Murray cod and Short-necked turtles, by Yellow rosellas, Superb parrots and by pelicans soaring high above us.

Jesus belonged to a people who knew about deserts and drought, and who loved moving, living water. They saw running water as a blessing from God and as a symbol of life. It was not taken for granted. They saw it as a precious gift. For them, a spring of living water was a beautiful image for the life that God gives us (Is 12:3;

55:1; Jer 2:13; Ps 46:4; Ez 47:1-20; Zech 14:8; Rev 22:1-2). They thought of God's presence and revelation, which they often described as the Wisdom of God, as like a life-giving fountain of living water (Prov 13:14; Sir 15:3; 24:23-29).

In John's Gospel, Jesus, hot and tired after his journey, sits by a well. He asks a Samaritan woman for a drink.

Then he engages with her in a long

conversation about the things of God. Later we hear that his disciples find this conversation astonishing (4:27). At the heart of this encounter, Jesus offers the woman living water:

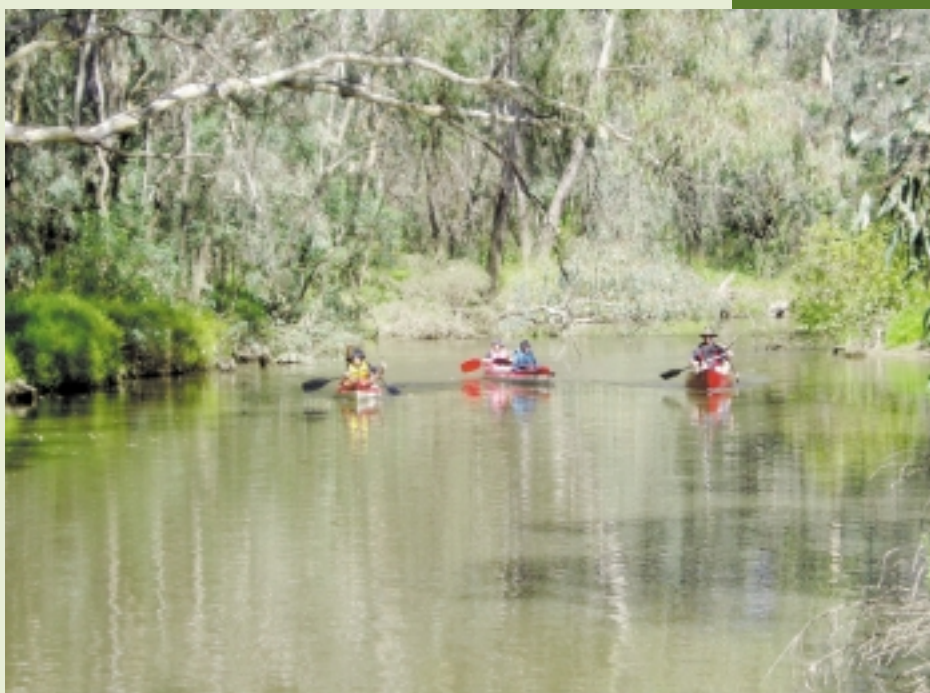
**Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life. (4:13-14)**



© Murray Darling Basin Commission. Photograph by Arthur Mostead.

Out of the  
believer's  
heart shall  
flow rivers  
of living  
water.

John 7:38



© Gill Baker

**"Let anyone  
who is thirsty  
come to me  
and let the  
one who  
believes in  
me drink."**

John 7:38

Later, at the feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem, Jesus cries out:

**Let anyone who is thirsty come to me,  
and let the one who believes in me drink.  
As the scripture has said 'Out of the  
believer's heart shall flow rivers of living  
water.'** (7:38)

The author of the gospel explains that this living water is the Spirit of God, the Spirit that will be poured out through Jesus' life-giving

death and resurrection (7:39). For John's Gospel, and for all later Christians, living water is a sign of the Holy Spirit, a sign of our baptismal life in Christ, a sign of the life of God in us.

Perhaps it would be good to imagine ourselves sitting quietly with the risen Jesus by the Darling, the Murrumbidgee or the Murray, as the woman of Samaria sat talking with him at the well. What would

Jesus feel for the human beings who live around the river? What would he have to say to us about the health of the river, about its fish, birds and animals? Where would he stand on practices that degrade the river?

We believe that the risen Christ would call us to see the river as a precious gift of God. He would teach us that it is a place where we can encounter God. He would explain how the rivers



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and all their creatures are, each in its own way, God's self-expression. He would tell us that the waters of the river are a sign of the life of the Spirit in us. He would point out that we hold the Murray-Darling in trust for future generations. He would teach us to love and respect the rivers.

We Christians should be the first to treasure the gift of living water. We have before us St Francis of Assisi who saw all of God's creatures as interconnected in a family of creation. For St Francis, other creatures are in kinship with human beings, brothers and sisters to us. In his Canticle, he speaks of water as "Sister Water," and celebrates it as beautiful, clear and pure and essential to our existence. Science also tells us that our lives and those of all other creatures on our planet are totally dependent upon clear and pure water. We need a renewed spirituality of water that recognises its centrality for all life. We need to treasure it as the life-giving gift of God and as a beautiful sign of the life of God in us.



**"We need a  
renewed  
spirituality of  
water . . . to  
treasure it as  
a beautiful  
sign of the life  
of God in us."**



© Ecopix

## Care for the Murray-Darling Basin as moral responsibility

While the Bible tells us that God entrusts the natural world to human beings (Gen 1:26), this is not to be interpreted in an unlimited or unprincipled way. According to the social teaching of the church, human beings have moral duties towards the natural world. They do not have absolute rights over nature. Pope John Paul II teaches that human beings have God-given responsibilities towards other creatures. We cannot simply do what we like with the natural world. We are called to respect the integrity of other creatures and the integrity of ecological systems. The Pope insists that we are constrained not only by *biological* laws but also by *moral* laws.<sup>2</sup> In our own case, this would mean that we are morally responsible before God for our actions in the Murray-Darling Basin. It would mean that the use of the gift of water, whether on farms or in towns and cities, is a matter of conscience, of right and wrong action before God.

One of the key principles the Pope offers for moral action is that “we cannot interfere in one area of the ecosystem without paying due attention both to the consequences of such interference in other areas and to the wellbeing of future generations.”<sup>3</sup> We have to take into account the common good. Applying this to the Murray-Darling Basin would mean that those involved in using water from the system need to be mindful of the good of the whole system. This includes the good health of the river itself, its plants, fish, animals and birds, and all the human beings that depend upon the health of the river, now and into the future. It would mean that those making decisions about storing or extracting water

**“...we cannot interfere in one area of the ecosystem without paying due attention both to the consequences of such interference in other areas and to the wellbeing of future generations...”**

Pope John Paul II

upstream are morally required to take into account the needs of those downstream.

Ecology involves respectful relations with human beings as well as with other creatures. Pope John Paul II calls this “human ecology.” He writes, for example: “It is the *ecological question* – ranging from the preservation of the natural habitats of the different species of animals and of other forms of life to ‘human ecology’ properly speaking – which finds in the Bible clear and strong ethical direction, leading to a solution which respects the great good of life, of every life.”<sup>4</sup> A vision of the



© Oz Green

Murray-Darling Basin founded upon this notion of human ecology would involve strong support for the dignity of human persons, for family and for communal life, within the context of respect for the land, the rivers, the fish, the animals, the birds, the trees and the shrubs of the Basin.

We find this notion reflected in the hope of many people who live in the Basin. What they hope for is that they will be able to share the beauty of the rivers with their grandchildren, that there will still be strong and viable rural communities, and that the river will still be a place of great River red gums, still home to the Murray cod, and still drinkable.

**“The Murray-Darling Basin . . . is our Galilee, our special place under the Southern Cross . . . where we are called to live out our own vocations before God.”**

**“. . . the use of the gift of water, whether on farms or in towns and cities, is a matter of conscience, of right and wrong action before God.”**



## Practical responses

Stewardship of the Murray-Darling Basin will involve a humble acknowledgment that the water of the Murray-Darling system is a limited resource, that our climate is dry and irregular, and that we face the uncertainties of climate change. It will demand that all of us who are water users, rural and urban, accept our responsibility to maintain the long-term health of the rivers. We are called to a stance that faces up to the finite nature of the waters that bring life to our land and that acts accordingly.

**We advocate:**



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**"Taking responsibility for our rivers will mean investing a significantly greater percentage of government funds in improved management of the Basin."**

## Restoring the flow

We strongly support government and community decisions to restore flow to the Murray. This will demand not only water-efficient practices and engineering solutions but also realistic limits on how much can be taken from the rivers. It will involve related initiatives such as salinity control in both dryland and irrigation areas, best management land use, and curtailing agriculture, industry and urban development that uses unsustainable quantities of

water. We support reducing salt and nutrient loads to the rivers, managing weir pools, limiting chemicals, enabling fish passages and removing exotic species. Taking responsibility for our rivers will mean investing a significantly greater percentage of government funds in improved management of the Basin. We believe that restoring environmental flow is essential for the health of the rivers, for the sake of human communities now and into the future, and for the survival of the diverse species of God's creatures that inhabit the Murray-Darling Basin.



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## Rural communities

The farming communities of the Murray-Darling Basin are a major focus of our pastoral concern. As bishops along the rivers, we are deeply interconnected with them and committed to them. We recognise that many of them have long led the way in care for the land and for the health of the rivers. We recognise that some face difficult and costly changes as governments make decisions for

the long-term health of our rivers. We commit ourselves to being with them in every

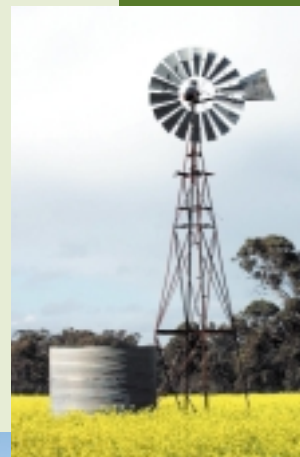
way we can, not only in our own pastoral care as bishops, but also through our Catholic parish communities and schools. We urge our state and federal governments to make their social and economic wellbeing a central priority. We believe that planning for the future of the Basin needs to give a central place to the future of its family and community life. Our vision for the Basin is that of strong rural communities, deeply in touch with the land and the rivers, working in a variety of agricultural enterprises, producing the food that feeds our nation and other nations in ecologically sustainable ways.



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## Indigenous Australians

We urge all involved in decisions about the Murray-Darling Basin to give priority to the indigenous peoples who have made their home along the rivers of the Basin. As church leaders, we call all Australians to respect their cultures and their relationships to the rivers. We support their right to appropriate access to the rivers for cultural and economic reasons, and their participation in the decisions

involving their cultural heritage. There is much to learn from indigenous Australians about respect and love for the rivers and for river creatures. We encourage all Australians, and in a particular way our parish and school communities, to take every opportunity to listen to indigenous Australians and to learn from them about their cultural traditions.



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## Upstream and downstream



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We believe that all decisions about water allocation and use need to take into account the whole Murray-Darling Basin. There is a moral requirement on those who use the water upstream to take into account the

effects of their actions on those who are

downstream. And, equally, those who are downstream need to respect those who use the water upstream and to take full responsibility for their own use of water.



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**"...we strongly support the goal of more efficient use of water, but we also want to affirm the social justice principle that the water of our rivers is given to us for the common good..."**

## Trade in water

Trade in water entitlements has come to be seen as an important mechanism in improving efficiency in the use of water. We strongly support the goal of more efficient use of water, but we also want to affirm the social justice principle that the water of our rivers is given to us for the common good. While we recognise that some trading may be for the common good, we believe it is essential to guard against the emergence of water monopolies and the real possibility that farming families will suffer because cities and towns can pay more for water.



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**I am about to do a new thing, now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?**

**I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.**

Isaiah 43:19-20

**You visit the Earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water...**

Psalm 65:9



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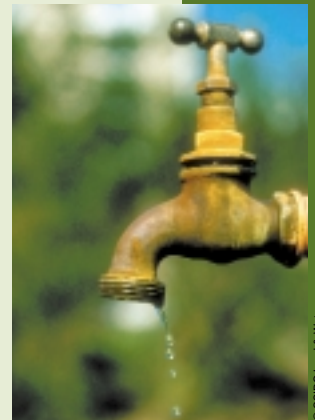


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## Treasuring the gift of water in our towns and cities

Those of us who live in towns and cities are called to take real responsibility for our use of the precious gift of water. We would like to conclude by proposing a vision of our families and our Catholic schools as places where children grow up with an understanding of the beautiful and ancient place we inhabit, knowing the issues that confront us with regard to the Murray-Darling Basin, and learning deep respect for God's gift of water. This vision would challenge our behaviour in the use of water for such things as lawns, gardens, showers, swimming pools, and car-washing. It would suggest alternative practices, such as native gardens, rainwater tanks, water-conserving bath-room and toilet fixtures, and the prudent use of storm water, groundwater and waste water. We need to model respect for the gift of water in our church and school buildings and gardens as well as in our individual homes.

Learning respect for the rivers and for the water we use will involve turning from old ways and taking up new ways. It will be part of the ecological conversion to which human beings of the twenty-first century are called.<sup>5</sup> Responding to this call is one of the great challenges facing the Christian community and the wider human community of the twenty-first century. We all have much to learn from those who have been committed to the wellbeing of creation. They have already long been learning what it is to live their *ecological vocation*.<sup>6</sup> We believe that all of us in the Christian community are called by God to discover and to live our own form of ecological vocation.



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**"It is not too late. God's world has incredible healing power.**

**Within a single generation, we could steer the Earth toward our children's future.**

**Let that generation start now, with God's help and blessing<sup>7</sup>."**

Pope John Paul II



Signed on 4 October 2004, The Feast Day of Francis of Assisi, Patron Saint of Ecology.

## Bishops of the Murray-Darling Basin

**Most Rev Philip Wilson**, Archbishop of the Archdiocese of **Adelaide** containing the biogeographic regions of Eyre Yorke Block, Flinders Lofty Block, Naracoorte Coastal Plain, and the Murray-Darling Depression including the mouth of the Murray River at Goolwa.

**Most Rev Peter Connors**, Bishop of the Diocese of **Ballarat** containing the biogeographic regions of the Naracoorte Coastal Plain, Victorian Volcanic Plain, Victorian Midlands and the Murray-Darling Depression and bordered by the Loddon and Murray Rivers.

**Most Rev Patrick Dougherty**, Bishop of the Diocese of **Bathurst** containing the biogeographic regions of the Darling Riverine Plains, Brigalow Belt South and the Western Slopes, including the Macquarie and Castlereagh Rivers.

**Most Rev Francis Carroll**, Archbishop of the Archdiocese of **Canberra and Goulburn** containing the biogeographic regions of the South East Highlands, Australian Alps, Western Slopes and Cobar Peneplain, including the source of the Murrumbidgee River.

**Most Rev Patrick Power**, Auxiliary Bishop of **Canberra and Goulburn** containing the biogeographic regions of the South East Highlands, Australian Alps, Western Slopes and Cobar Peneplain, including the source of the Murrumbidgee River.

**Most Rev Denis Hart**, Archbishop of the Archdiocese of **Melbourne** containing the biogeographic regions of the Victorian Midlands and the Victorian Volcanic Plain, including the Goulburn River at Seymour.

**Most Rev Eugene Hurley**, Bishop of the Diocese of **Port Pirie** containing the biogeographic regions of Eyre Yorke Block, Flinders Lofty Block, Simpson Strzelecki Dunefields and the Riverlands, including the Murray River

**Most Rev Joseph Grech**, Bishop of the Diocese of **Sandhurst** containing the biogeographic regions of the Australian Alps, South Riverina and Victorian Midlands, including the Ovens and Goulburn Rivers.

**Most Rev William Morris**, Bishop of the Diocese of **Toowoomba** containing the biogeographic regions of the Mulga Lands, Channel Country, Darling River Plains, Simpson Strzelecki Dunefields and the Nandewar, including the source of the Condamine, Warrego, Maranoa and Balonne Rivers.

**Most Rev Gerard Hanna**, Bishop of the Diocese of **WaggaWagga** containing the biogeographic regions of the Riverina and South Western Slopes, including the source of the Murray River.

**Most Rev Christopher Toohey**, Bishop of the Diocese of **Wilcannia-Forbes** containing the biogeographic regions of the Mulga Lands, Simpson Strzelecki Dunefields, Darling Riverine Plains, Channel Country, Cobar Peneplain, Broken Hill Complex and Murray Darling Depression, including the confluences of the Murrumbidgee and Darling Rivers with the Murray River.

**Bishop Toohey is Chair of Catholic Earthcare Australia, co-ordinators of the project.**



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The rivers of the Murray-Darling Basin bring life wherever they flow, from outback Queensland to the Murray mouth, from the Snowy Mountains to flat Mallee plains.

This beautiful part of our country is becoming degraded and its rivers, wetlands and floodplains are in poor condition. The restoration of the health of the Murray, Murrumbidgee, Darling and other rivers of the Basin is one of the most urgent issues facing our country.

We acknowledge the enormous amount of community work already done in addressing the issues but we believe that many more Australians need to become involved. As bishops who live and work in the Basin, we would like to add our voices in support of the rivers and all those working to save them, and reflect on the Murray-Darling Basin from the perspective of Christian faith.

We see its life-giving waters as a precious gift of God for the common good. We see human beings as responsible before God for the well-being of the river system. We are called to live more sustainably and grow in ecological wisdom and practice, so that the generations to follow inherit a healthy and bountiful Basin as intended by God.

O Lord my God, you are very great...

You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills,  
Giving drink to every wild animal; the wild asses quench their thirst,  
By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation;  
they sing among the branches.

From your lofty abode you water the mountains;  
the Earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.

You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use,  
to bring forth food from the Earth, and wine to gladden the human heart,  
oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart.

Psalm 104:1-5



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