

THE 20TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE NSW MURRAY WETLANDS WORKING GROUP

The 20th anniversary of the NSW Murray Wetlands Working Group was the perfect opportunity for committee members, past and present employees, friends and associates of the group to get together and share the stories of what has made and still makes this group so special.

The anniversary was celebrated at Wonga Wetlands, near Albury (NSW) on 26 April 2012 with an evening meal and a glass or two. Among those who attended were:

Paul Lloyd, who was the group's second project officer, worked for the group from 1994 to 2001. Originally a chemist he had moved out of the laboratory and into the Natural Resource Management field. Paul was first based at Dareton in south-west NSW, for a short time, then Deniliquin for three years and finally Albury for another three years.

"Initially I took on the job with the working group because it seemed a good opportunity," says Paul, "but one of the things that stood out and made me stick around for so long was the practicality of the job. It involved talking to people about changing the way water and wetlands were being managed. It also had a great level of autonomy, of being able to develop ideas, put them to the working group and then see them through. The working group was great to work with. They were very pragmatic, wanted to get on and get things done and didn't want to be held back by some of the limitations that government agencies are often bound by."

Paul says what he valued about the group was the honesty of their approach and their willingness "to be blunt and direct in a very constructive way" and to think about how to do things rather than focus on why things couldn't be done.

"Also, at a personal level, they were inspiring people to work with, and quite humble in their own way," says Paul. "It's not about ego; it's about doing something they believe in."

Paul says when he left the group, it was well-placed to go onto its next phase of development which was to consolidate its broadening focus, develop a more systematic approach and coordinate and bring together its many projects and activities.

(Paul is now based in Melbourne working with the Department of Sustainability and Environment in river health and water planning.)

Judy Frankenberg is one of the working group's original committee members and has been involved with the group since its inception in 1992. A scientist with expertise in floodplain and wetland management, and also a farmer, Judy is now also a board member of Murray Darling Wetlands Ltd, the corporate arm of the group which was set up in 2009.

Judy says of all the projects the group has done, it is the Wetlands on Farms project, which led to the group being awarded the National Thiess Riverprize in 2007, that she values the most. This project involved providing water to farmers to flood wetlands on their properties that had been dry for years; cut off from natural flows by irrigation infrastructure.

“That was something that nobody else could or would have done I think, particularly as we did it during the drought years, from 2000 to 2006,” says Judy. “It was a wonderful thing for those landholders because something good happened. It affected a lot of people...they were all small wetlands and in the scheme of things each wetland wasn’t all that significant but collectively they were. It was a real landscape changing event which also changed ideas and attitudes amongst the landholders. It was a wonderful thing, how the wetlands came back after being dry for so long.”

Judy says she has continued to be involved with the group “because it is such a worth-while thing to do. “I have a professional interest in wetlands but also have an environmental interest as well. I’ve just always liked wetlands. Being involved with this group was a wonderful opportunity to make a difference and actually do something, not just talk or write about things but to actually be able to influence the management of wetlands.”

While **Dr Terry Hillman** describes his association with the working group as “peripheral”, with a research interest in floodplain wetlands, the former director of The Murray-Darling Freshwater Research Centre and Deputy Director of the CRC for Freshwater Ecology, has always been interested in the group’s work.

“I’m interested in the different scales at which both ecology and management take place,” says Terry. “And the scale at which the group works - the regional one which relates directly to people, not to interests but to actual people- is one of the important ones.”

“We can’t solve every problem at this scale but there are a suite of problems that can best be dealt with at the level of individual wetlands and individual groups, just as catchment management authorities are very good because they deal with issues at a catchment scale.”

As Terry says he is passionate about the floodplains of the region and accordingly recognises the benefits to the wetlands of the group’s work.

“Certainly I’ve always had a sort of informal relationship with the group and been able to talk about issues,” says Terry, who sees himself as a friend of the group.

“While the group’s triumphs haven’t been broadly recognised, they have been quite substantial down as much to their community relationship skills and their resource management skills. I think the arrangements they got to with Murray Irrigation Limited to be able to deliver water on-farm to wetlands were just totally exemplary and yet, on the other side, they were probably leading in issues like acid sulfate soils at Bottle Bend and things like that. They managed to deal with a hostile public or a public who hadn’t thought about doing anything for the environment and bring them on board to a point where, even though they were very short of water themselves, they were still processing water for wetlands, which is just amazing. This just shows the power of this kind of organisation at that scale.”

Terry says he has continued his association with the group over the years “because they are good people doing good things, so why wouldn’t you try and support them?”

Terry says these days he is on a lot of boards and committees, still quite heavily involved with the Murray-Darling Basin Authority in aspects such as water caps and sustainability audits, and works with various Catchment Management Authorities and state government departments in NSW, Victoria and SA.

Environmental lawyer **Kathy Ridge** is one of the newcomers. On the board of Murray Darling Wetlands Ltd since January 2012, Kathy was invited to join the board by the group’s president Howard Jones, something she describes as a “great honour.”

Kathy's association with Howard and the group's executive officer Deb Nias goes back many years to the time when she headed up the Nature Conservation Council of NSW (1999 to 2003).

"Six years ago I was setting up an environmental water trust for the Council as a consultancy and it was suggested I talk to both Howard and Deb," says Kathy. "I already knew them both but that was the first time we actually worked together on something. It was a good experience to interview Deb with all her experience in this area and ground-truthing of what some of the anticipated problems might be. There were very few people who had actually done what we were thinking of doing in Australia which was delivering environmental water and holding entitlements and actually making sure you get a good result for that water at the end of the day."

Kathy says to her, the overwhelming value of the working group is that they are capable of bridging the very real and very large divide between all of the stakeholders "to actually get things done."

"Unless you have the respect of and a track record with each of those players – government agencies, landholders - you are not going anywhere," says Kathy. "The Murray Wetlands Working Group walks both sides of the street with integrity and passion and are therefore able to get some things done that other people just could not do."

Former project officer **Trish Bowen's** current job is giving her the opportunity to once again work closely with the Wetlands Working Group. Nowadays she is the catchment coordinator for water with the Murray Catchment Management Authority (The CMA and Working Group are currently working on a large wetland rehabilitation program - see Current Projects).

Trish spent three years with the group, from 2007 to 2010, interrupted when she took maternity leave for the birth of her son Ewan. She says she applied for the job because after 10 years of research with The Murray-Darling Freshwater Research Centre and doing her PhD (on what happens to organic matter from aquatic plants once they die and go into the river) she was "looking for something different."

"It was all heavily science focussed and doing my PhD challenged my ideas about where I was heading," says Trish. "I thought I would like to move into the Natural Resource Management field. I knew Deb and I knew the fantastic work the working group had done and I thought that if I could be part of that group it would just offer such a fantastic opportunity to do some really exciting stuff. At the time and really even now they were doing really innovative work; they were leading the field in terms of environmental water application."

Trish says one of the reasons the wetlands working group has been such a success over the years "is the fantastic blend of science, management and community values that the group represents, and integrates into all its activities."

"They were one of the first groups in Australia to pull this off successfully, through mutual respect, shared goals and a commitment to learning from experience," she says.

"One of the things about this group is that it has been able to tread the line between respect in the scientific world through to individual landholders."

Ian Davidson, a committee member of the group since 1996, is well-placed to make the above comment. A wildlife biologist who runs his own environmental consultancy company, Ian first became involved with the group as a representative of the Australian Conservation Foundation. Around that time he was also on the NSW Government's environmental flows committee for the Murray River (regulated sections) alongside fellow committee members, Howard Jones and Vin Byrnes.

“We would regularly meet with individuals or organisations at all levels, all spectrums; listen to ideas landholders with wetlands had and if they had merit, try and give them a ‘voice’,” says Ian. “We figured they had something to say that we could learn from. That’s what I liked. For most of our projects we dealt with land managers which is different, if you like, than putting down policies and saying that’s the way it’s got to be.”

Ian says he became involved with the group because there was an opportunity to affect practical, on-ground wetland management. Whilst not a board member of Murray Darling Wetlands Ltd, he still has a strong interest in the group and where it is heading.

Of the group Ian says: “I think we’ve got a good spread of talent that has a lot of practical knowledge of how irrigation and water systems work; some really solid scientists; there’s a lot of mutual respect, and I think we can still have an influence on wetland management.”
