

# FISH NEED WATER TOO!

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Early last century the Murray, Eastern and Trout cod were so plentiful that many of the small diversified farmers whose properties bordered creeks and rivers in the eastern states often caught and fed these fish to their pigs. Today these species of cod are in danger of extinction with the Murray cod just recently listed as vulnerable. Why?

The reasons are many and varied but from my perspective the massive changes to the river systems has been the main reason for the demise of the fish. There are more than 1100 weirs, dams, barrages and the like on the Murray Darling system. That plus the continuously increasing demand on water for agriculture and human consumption has meant that the habitat and breeding cycle of the fish has been modified so much that they have virtually been eliminated.

Can this happen to the barramundi? Obviously the answer is yes. Does anyone want that? Obviously the answer is no.

Australia is spending billions of dollars to repair the damage done through inappropriate European farming practices. At last the message is getting across with some leading scientific groups espousing some radical and innovative plans to turn the tide of damage from the past. The cost of repairing damage to the ecosystems is thought to be about 100 times greater than the cost of managing and maintaining the status quo.

What is an ecosystem actually worth? Is it more than the value of developing an area with so-called profitable industries such as broad acre irrigation, pastoralism, horticulture etc? The NT and indeed Australia can profit from retaining the pristine nature of our unique rivers and using these assets to generate wealth without compromising the environment.

In 100 years what will the Daly River region be worth if it is retained as a natural biodiverse rich drawcard? And how should this be measured? My suggestion is a quadruple bottom line approach of social, economic, environmental and cultural?

Making better investment decisions is the task of government. My premise is that historically these decisions have favoured agricultural interests and industries – the time has come to end this perceived automatic right.

In the '*Sustaining our Natural Systems and Biodiversity*' report to the Prime Minister's Science, Engineering and Innovation Council one of the recommendations was;

*That the Commonwealth Government urgently works with the States and Territories to limit broad-scale clearing to those instances where the proponents can demonstrate that regional biodiversity and hydrological objectives are not compromised.*

Two years ago the draft for the Daly River Biodiversity and Conservation plan was released, or at least we somehow got a copy, and we have looked for the next draft. However in the mean time the government continues to approve land clearing. And still we wait for the next draft of the plan to be released. This is clearly a case of having the cart before the horse.

The long-term future for fishing lies in habitat, nurseries, and unpolluted and unobstructed waterways. Habitat and nurseries have been, and still are, being destroyed through a culture of “develop at all costs”. Admittedly, there is an awakening amongst the governments and planning authorities that the wetlands and habitats do play a very important role.

The concept of approving development in a piece meal manner is akin to signing the death warrant for the Daly River region. If this government approves a little bit and the next government approves a little bit and the next and so on we will end up with a botched up region just like the mistakes of the eastern states and everyone, including the river, will lose and lose badly.

Development must progress but for the sake of getting the decision correct what will a further 2 or 3 or 5 year delay mean in 100 years time? The time lag between clearing and developing and the subsequent impacts can be as much as 50 years. We need some political decisions with courage and long term vision.

In the Wentworth Group’s *Blueprint for a living continent* it states;

*To live in harmony with the Australian landscape we must learn to appreciate the services it provides us. Things like clean water, fresh air, healthy and productive soil. The value of these ecosystem services is enormous, but is often invisible because we haven’t learnt to see it.*

The Blueprint goes on to make what I think is a very important and often a completely missed point in the debate about development.

*In many places, the economic benefits of agriculture are actually less than the value of ecosystem services lost because of these practices.*

The NT needs to develop its assets but that development does not have to take on the historical vogue previously seen around Australia. We can and must be smart in the way we progress this and a change to the philosophy of development is essential. How that is achieved is firmly in the hands of NT government but the community should also have the opportunity to influence the decision process.

If we do have some development through agriculture such as broad acre irrigated crops the farm design and layout must be such that there is safety mechanisms incorporated. These include but are not limited to:

- 1000 metre riparian zones on both sides of the main river arms;
- riparian zones on all other minor arms and tributaries;
- incentives to landholders to maintain wetlands and manage the riparian zones;
- trigger points to be established for water harvesting rates and;
- strictly enforced chemical and pesticide application methods.

Again from the '*Sustaining our Natural Systems and Biodiversity*' report to the Prime Minister's Science, Engineering and Innovation Council part of one of the recommendations is;

That the Commonwealth Government work with States and Territories to:

- *define a set of Australia's least altered rivers as "Heritage Rivers" and consider listing them under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act;*

If the Daly River does not qualify for 'heritage' status then no river would. It is a jewel in the NT crown and we need to protect and cherish its qualities. The NT government should either work with the Commonwealth government to do this or initiate this idea themselves.

### Summary

It all starts at the very highest point in the country – what we pour onto the ground or dig up will somehow impact on something somewhere downstream. We have the challenge of making sure that what we do from now on, anywhere on land, is challenged and the possible consequences for the marine and freshwater environment are realised and taken into account before proceeding. This is not an easy task as government will be pressured from all wanting to move forward on the so-called "development" of this country.

Finally, the Daly River is a Mecca to recreational anglers and short-term profit from unsustainable development could mean the demise of angling and the mighty barra. We don't want that and I am sure no one else does either.

Thank you.