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COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION – LEARNINGS FROM THE MURRAY DARLING BASIN EXPERIENCE.

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BACKGROUND

Water has always been 'front of mind' for Australians. Water defined survival and prosperity for indigenous people for over 60 000 years, and white occupiers of the land have found the same since they arrived in this continent just over 200 years ago. One hundred years later, around the turn of the 20th century, water and how it should be managed was definitely on the minds of people who lived in the Murray-Darling Basin, especially those along the Murray where upstream and downstream users vied for scarce water for their own benefit during severe drought.

The cumulative off-site impacts of two centuries of agricultural and urban activity in the Basin have created catchments where land resources are degrading and polluting our rivers with salinity and other contaminants. River health is declining, and there is intense competition for water—our most precious resource. There is continuing and increasing conflict between individual farmers, between communities, and between the states over the use and sharing of the Basin's resources, especially water. Property rights and obligations are at best ill defined and there is no common 'currency' to describe water or land entitlements across the Basin. At the same time, market prices for food and fibre do not cover the full cost of production, and farmers are forced to run down the Basin's natural capital.

We've had a century of debating and developing institutions and governance arrangements in the Murray-Darling Basin, yet resource and environmental management there is still fragmented—across jurisdictions, sectors, portfolios and issues. Management of natural resources is not yet entrenched as a core responsibility for public investment like health and education. And despite our long history of doing so, we are nowadays reluctant to invest public funds where there is any likelihood of benefiting private interests. This is despite the fact that a large proportion of the Basin is privately owned and turning around resource degradation for public good outcomes will rely in large part of the actions of private owners on their land.

So where are we now on this journey? What is our understanding and aspiration? Are we sufficiently well developed to move ahead quickly?

Over the last two decades or so those responsible for the management of the Basin's natural resources have come to realise that focussing on single issues and simplistic uni-dimensional policy solutions will not achieve our current aspiration of 'a healthy River Murray system,

sustaining communities and preserving unique values'.[1] We have known about the issues for many decades, but with time have come to understand them better, particularly in terms of linkages.

The philosophy of integrated catchment management, which has been at the heart of natural resource management in the Basin since 1990, grew out of our recognition of these linkages and the need to integrate biophysical issues. Perhaps our main progress over the last four to five years has been our growing realisation that changing the way we manage natural resources is less about the resources than it is about people and their behaviour. Integration of biophysical understanding by itself does not bring about change—it is critical to incorporate the social, human and institutional dimensions.

It is now recognised that complex, integrated approaches that incorporate the values of, and are owned by, all of the stakeholders are required. We know that a significant proportion of the community is apathetic or resistant to change until there is a need to respond to a crisis. Our understanding of what motivates people to change and of the mechanisms to influence and assist behavioural change is, however, poorly developed. But, without stakeholder involvement in the integration process, it is still unlikely that the best policy and the best plans will generate any more than marginal or incremental change.

In the following sections of this paper, I will outline our current approach to integrated catchment management in the Murray-Darling Basin and the 'platform' it sets for community involvement. I will then examine further the importance of such involvement and what is required for it to take us into the future with more confidence.

INTEGRATED CATCHMENT MANAGEMENT (ICM)

A very complex set of biophysical relationships exist within the Basin that are overlain with equally complex social and economic frameworks. It quickly becomes apparent that we need to be able to bring together disciplines and practitioners to develop integrated policies.

The Integrated Catchment Management Policy for the Murray Darling Basin[2] represents the community and government response to this situation. Released in June 2001, it is the first policy under the *Murray-Darling Basin Agreement* arrangements to be jointly signed by the 'peak' government and community bodies—the Ministerial Council and its Community Advisory Committee. The policy requires that the Ministerial Council and the Community Advisory Committee jointly review progress of the ICM approach against an agreed set of performance measures on an annual basis.

The policy statement makes the commitment that 'we the community and governments of the Murray-Darling Basin commit ourselves to do all that needs to be done to manage and use the resources of the Basin in a way that is ecologically sustainable'.

The goals of the policy are to achieve:

- healthy rivers
- healthy ecosystems and catchments
- innovative, competitive and ecologically sustainable industries
- healthy regional communities.

The policy includes a commitment for those involved in, or concerned about, natural resource

management in the Basin to work together in a manner consistent with shared values (Box 1) and principles (Box 2). These values and principles were developed during the preparation of the policy to guide the achievement of the policy's goals, and reflect the policy's emphasis on the 'human dimension' of natural resource management.

BOX 1

OUR VALUES

Courage

- take a visionary approach, provide leadership and be prepared to make difficult decisions

Inclusiveness

- build relationships based on trust and sharing, considering the needs of future generations, and working together in a true partnership
- engage all partners, including Indigenous communities, and ensure that partners have the capacity to be fully engaged

Commitment

- act with passion and decisiveness, taking the long-term view and aiming for stability in decision making
- take a Basin perspective and a non-partisan approach to Basin management

Respect and honesty

- tolerate different views, respect each other and acknowledge the reality of each other's situation
- act with integrity, openness and honesty, be fair and credible, and share knowledge and information
- use resources equitably and respect the environment

Flexibility

- accept reform where it is needed, be willing to change, and continuously improve our actions through a learning approach
- Practicability
- choose practicable, long term outcomes and select viable solutions to achieve these outcomes

Mutual obligation

- share responsibility and accountability, and act responsibly, with fairness and justice
- support each other through necessary change

BOX 2

OUR PRINCIPLES

Integration

- manage catchments holistically, taking account of the integration of natural systems and the inter-dependence of the Basin community and natural resources

Accountability

- assign responsibilities and accountabilities
- manage resources wisely, being accountable and reporting to our partners

Transparency

- clarify the outcomes sought
- be open about how to achieve outcomes and what is expected from each partner

Effectiveness

- act to achieve agreed outcomes
- learn from our successes and failures and continuously improve our actions

Efficiency

- maximise the benefits and minimise the costs of actions

Full accounting

- take account of the full range of costs and benefits, including economic, environmental, social and off-site costs and benefits

Informed decision making

- make decisions at the most appropriate scale
- make decisions on the best available information, and continuously improve knowledge
- support the involvement of Indigenous communities in decision making, understanding the value of this involvement

Learning approach

- learn from our failures and successes
- learn from each other

How will the goals in the ICM policy be achieved?

The ICM policy uses biophysical targets for catchment health as a major tool for achieving its goals. Targets will be set in each major catchment of the Basin as a 'floor' on catchment health. They will incorporate and integrate targets for water quality (salinity and nutrients), water sharing (consumptive/environmental flows), riverine ecosystem health, and terrestrial biodiversity (Figure 1).

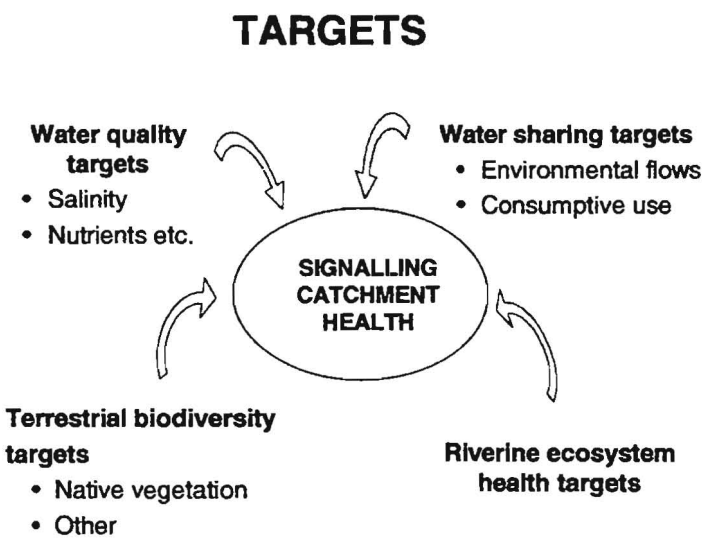

Figure 1. ICM targets for catchment health

These targets will reflect the environmental, economic and social assets that communities and governments agree to protect; the use of appropriate processes to jointly achieve this agreement will be critical. Figure 2 provides examples of targets for a catchment. Setting and achieving end-of-valley targets for each catchment in the Basin will be needed to protect the health of the Basin as a whole.

To implement this targets-based approach to catchment health, the policy gives a commitment to strengthen the capacity of all the partners, including government agencies, catchment management organisations, local government, and the broader community, particularly at the catchment scale. Capacity in the context of the policy covers a broad range of things, including legal capacity, institutional capacity, planning, management and financial capacity,

technical and information skills and capacities, and leadership skills.

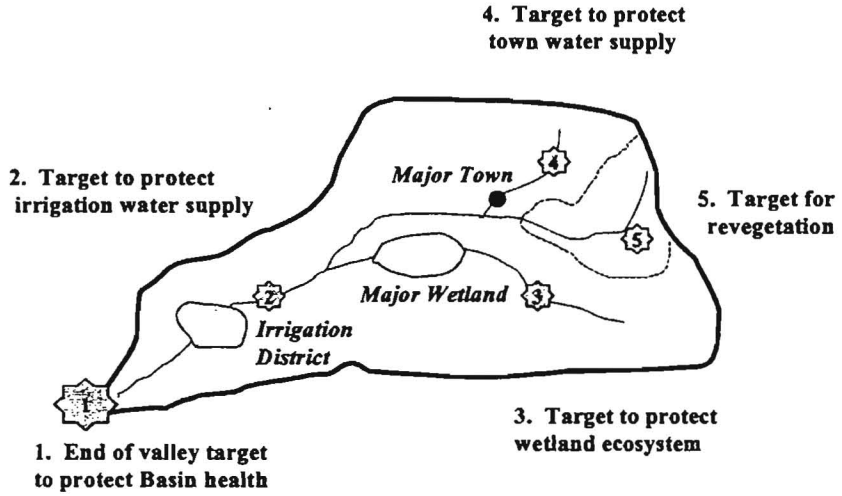

Figure 2. Targets and the assets they are designed to protect in a catchment

Delivery of catchment targets for salt, water flow and so on will require far more sophisticated governance arrangements at the Basin and catchment scale than are currently in place. This includes a stronger partnership approach between governments and the community, built around the shared values and principles. The success or otherwise of involving people outside of government in this partnership in part hinges on our understanding of 'community'.

WHAT IS THE COMMUNITY?

Is 'community' a comforting word that means 'the public', but with the politics taken out? The ICM Policy refers to '[r]ural and regional communities, landholders and land managers, Indigenous people, Landcare groups, urban people, industries, businesses, special interest groups and individuals [who] all have a vital interest in the Basin'.[3] It observes that '[t]hese people and organisations make up the Basin community'.

Does just naming the various groups with a 'stake' in the Basin give us sufficient definition to ensure their involvement or involve them appropriately? I believe not. The 'Basin community' is a highly complex, interacting set of communities. We are all members of different communities at once, some defined by place, others by interests, some enduring, other short-lived. Some people desperately want involvement in policy debates or resource management; some could not care less; most are in between. In thinking about the role of people in managing the Basin, this messy reality must be taken into account as we grapple with stakeholder input.

STAKEHOLDER INPUT—WHY?

To meet the commitment and achieve 'a healthy River Murray system [and Murray-Darling Basin], sustaining communities and preserving unique values' requires people to change. The adoption of the ICM approach in the policy commits everyone—from individual landholders

through to elected representatives—to do things differently. This will not happen without much debate about the science, values, and aspirations people have at different scales. It will require difficult choices to be made based on a good understanding of the trade-offs. Action plans will have to be negotiated, agreed, resourced, implemented and people held accountable in some way. These debates and activities can no longer happen within the institutions of government alone because increasingly people are losing trust and faith in both the political and bureaucratic arms of government.

The Murray-Darling Basin has an area of about one million square kilometres and spans four states and one territory. Two million people reside in the Basin; within this population there are many industries, occupations, cultural and socio-economic differences. Most importantly, the value that those two million people place on the natural resources provided to them by the Basin varies considerably according to geography, socio-economic status, culture, power and condition of the resource base. Because that resource base is so degraded in many areas, we know that the change agenda for improvement is major, not minor, and that implementing the agenda inevitably will involve winners and losers. To achieve lasting change that people will commit to requires procedural justice with all of the interests represented in some way, individuals and communities being treated 'fairly', and losers in addition being allowed to retain their dignity.

A stakeholder survey undertaken in 2001 in the Basin[4] indicated that 95 per cent of those surveyed strongly supported the principle of improving the health of the Murray River system, through increased environmental flows. However, it also showed that this support level dropped to 40 per cent if the community were not included in the decision-making process. This sends a clear signal that the community *must* be involved in the process of decision-making in an *active* way if there is to be any chance of bringing about major change.

In integrated catchment management governments can make the 'law' but if people don't like it, don't understand it or don't know about it then they won't change their behavior. The rhetoric of participatory governance and partnerships suggests that a greater involvement in negotiation and decision-making than we are currently told is desirable at both Basin and catchment scales.

STAKEHOLDER INPUT—CONSULTATION TO PARTICIPATION

There will always be debate about how much community involvement is enough and whether that involvement should be in an advisory or decision-making capacity. At minimum, the purpose of community participation should be to inform decision-makers and ensure that their decisions bring about changes in behaviors with a minimum of conflict.

Up until recent times governments have used community consultation as the mechanism to obtain stakeholder input. From the perspective of the stakeholders, it is apparent that this has not been adequate—stakeholders feel that they have not been heard, in particular where the decisions have involved significant tradeoffs and there are likely to be winners and losers. The ICM policy for the Basin and stakeholders themselves are articulating the need for much more participatory processes in decision-making than traditional 'consultation'.

What is the difference between public consultation and public participation? In integrated catchment management Chenoweth, Ewing and Bird[5] argue that consultation at best involves authorities listening to the stakeholders, whereas participation is a more engaging process in

which people share, negotiate and control decision-making processes in conjunction with authorities. The community have been 'pushing' for this greater say, rather than the bureaucracy 'asking' for it; the development of the 'community–government partnership model' that we now have has been led by the community.

A number of academics[6], after analysing the participatory structures established in the Murray-Darling Basin, have identified five key factors in conflict surrounding river management. These are:

- self interest
- different value or belief systems
- data (disputes over legitimacy of information, lack of understanding about data, not enough data, incorrect data etc)
- labeling or stereotyping of stakeholders
- conflict inherent in organisational structures (eg between or within government agencies).

Simplistic consultative approaches to complex natural resource management issues cannot resolve many of the issues contained within these conflicts. How well, then, do the institutions within the Murray-Darling Basin support stakeholder input?

THE MURRAY-DARLING BASIN INSTITUTIONS

The Basin has an extremely complex array of institutions (laws, policies, organisations etc) that are complex, interrelated, often contradictory, frequently competitive, and in reality are impenetrable to most people. The institutions are also continually evolving—while this is necessary, from a stakeholder perspective it is critical that there be some stability in the way they are able to engage as part of these institutions.

Millington[7] states that there are four common features/attributes/principles that constitute best practice in Integrated River Basin Management.

1. An institutional framework exists which is both robust and flexible, and includes modern legislation and an integrated policy framework.

2. Planning and management is knowledge-driven. Strategic assessment of water and related resources receives high priority, and does not stop at mere data management, but actively pursues the generation of strategically focussed information and knowledge.

3. Integration is built into institutions, resource management, and policy. There is recognition of the holistic nature of ecosystems, and all policies, decisions and projects are evaluated against this background.

4. Community participation is built into all processes and is seen as the normal way of doing business. It recognises also that the natural resources of a country belong to its people, and they have a right to participate in its management. The flow-on effects of community participation are that it leads to government efficiency, ownership of policies and actions by the community, and to more readily accepted principles of cost sharing.

Within the Murray-Darling Basin, we need to examine the fourth feature—community participation—at Basin, jurisdiction (state government) and catchment scales.

Basin scale

At its first meeting in August 1986 the Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council formally established a Community Advisory Committee (CAC) through clause 14 of the *Murray-Darling Basin Agreement*. This decision was based on the Ministers' recognition of the need for 'effective community participation in the resolution of the water, land and environment problems of the Basin'.

The terms of reference of the CAC are to advise the Council:

- on natural resource management issues referred to the Committee by the Ministerial Council or Commission; and
- on the views of the Basin's communities on matters identified by the Committee as being of concern.

The CAC reports directly to the Ministerial Council. Currently, the committee comprises an independent Chairman and 28 members, namely:

- 23 state representatives chosen on a catchment/regional basis, nine from New South Wales, five from Victoria, four from South Australia, four from Queensland, and one from the Australian Capital Territory; and
- a representative nominated by each of five special-interest 'peak' organisations—the National Farmers Federation, the Australian Conservation Foundation, the Australian Local Government Association, the Australian Landcare Council, and the Indigenous Land Corporation.

The Community Advisory Committee provides advice to the Ministerial Council on issues of strategic significance to the Basin. The members do not consider that they are representative of the Basin community, but that they represent a range of interests and views that exist in the community. The Committee is also able to operate in a non-jurisdictional manner because members are not beholden to any particular employer or political interest.

Over recent years the CAC increasingly has worked closely with the Murray-Darling Basin Commission on all major knowledge generation and policy development matters. This is the only institutional arrangement in Australia that has community participation built in from the earliest stages of policy development.

The CAC is not the only source of community input at the Basin scale. All policy initiatives of the Ministerial Council are exposed to the wider community through what have been essentially consultation processes. In the Ministerial Council's most recent initiative—the River Murray Environmental Flows process—a much more ambitious community participation process is being trialled across the Basin.

Jurisdiction and catchment scales

Under the Australian Constitution the states have full responsibility for managing their own natural resources. Any decisions taken at the Basin scale therefore must be implemented by the states. This occurs through complex arrangements at state, catchment and local scales. All states in the Basin have embraced some form of 'community-government partnership' arrangements at the catchment scale. In some instances these represent a reasonably integrated approach, but in others there is considerable room for improvement. None of the current arrangements meet all of the criteria set out in the ICM Policy for the Basin (see boxes 3 and 4).

BOX 3

Characteristics of an integrated catchment approach to natural resources management

- Decisions regarding natural resources—land, water and other environmental resources—are integrated at catchment scale.
- Decisions about the environment of the catchment, its economic productivity and its people are integrated.
- Responsibilities and accountabilities are clearly determined with matching capacities within the catchment.
- Strategies and action plans for catchment natural resources are developed and implemented in partnership between the community and governments.
- The mix of mechanisms, including incentives, investments and regulations, are designed and determined for each catchment.
- Allocation of natural resources, including water, is determined on a catchment basis.
- Catchment management delivers national, Basin and State outcomes within a system of agreed targets and within a long-term investment framework.
- Monitoring, evaluation and reporting systems support decision making at catchment scale.

BOX 4

Characteristics of a well-developed catchment strategy

A well-developed catchment strategy:

- is managed by an organisation which is capable of undertaking the strategy; has the authority to manage the strategy on behalf of partners; is legally able to contract for work proposed; and is accountable to partners for implementation of the strategy
- is developed in consultation with all partners
- describes the local environment and natural resources
- provides links to State/Territory, Basin and national policies and strategies
- outlines economic, environmental and social aspirations for the catchment
- identifies goals and measurable outcomes sought by the strategy, including assets to be protected
- sets targets towards achieving measurable outcomes
- ensures compliance with targets required for Basin and catchment health
- assesses current management practices
- identifies appropriate policies and mechanisms to support change
- identifies issues of concern and the process for working through them
- describes priorities for on-ground actions, and identifies the action plans for implementing the strategy
- outlines the capacities (skills, knowledge, legal, institutional, knowledge, skills and financial resources) required to implement the strategy
- describes catchment monitoring, evaluation and reporting arrangements
- is supported by a communication and engagement plan for the strategy

LESSONS LEARNT FROM A DECADE OF IMPLEMENTING ICM

If governments are to work collaboratively with communities in the Basin within an ICM framework to achieve shared goals and catchment health, as articulated in the June 2001 ICM

Policy, a number of critical factors must be addressed to ensure appropriate stakeholder input.

From the outset, stakeholders at community and government levels must commit to working together through an agreed process.

The purpose of the process will often vary, for example in some instances it might seek community input into a strategic decision, but in other instances it might require maximum involvement in negotiating the details of implementing the decision. Other issues, especially at catchment scale, demand close and constant participation.

No matter what the issue being addressed, people must know:

- that the process is fair
- that there are opportunities for access to debates
- that their views have been heard, considered and respected.

To achieve this, the process should have the following characteristics.

What must the process cover?—knowledge generation, plan development and decision making. The non-negotiable issues must be identified up front so that people know what they can negotiate over. Governments must not predetermine the outcome/s of the process.

Who should be involved? There must be wide stakeholder involvement in the development of plans and policy. The process for selecting participants to be involved must be open and transparent and ensure that minority groups or non-aligned individuals are not excluded.

How should the processes be run?—with clarity and transparency at all times. The purpose and rules of engagement for the particular consultation or participation activity must be clearly articulated, and the boundaries and roles of all participants made clear at the outset. Power issues between stakeholders must be accounted for in the process, and cultural differences catered for (especially for minority groups). Time and group dynamics are critical—enough time must be allocated to the process, appropriate and accessible venues chosen, language barriers accounted for, and the format of meetings etc made clear. Thorough public education about the issues, decisions and impacts must be undertaken as a component of participation. The process should be a positive one that develops the communities' skills and knowledge base, and enhances personal growth.

What knowledge-base is required? The knowledge-base must be adequate to inform the decisions at whatever scale is appropriate. Stakeholders must be able to debate, challenge and come to a shared understanding of the knowledge base.

Solutions. Individual landholders must be provided with integrated solutions that they can incorporate directly into their business operations.

The institutional framework must support community involvement and an integrated approach.

A larger percentage of the community must become involved in implementing policies or plans at the Basin, catchment and local scales. Encouraging that involvement will require greater investment of effort and resources. The need and options for change must be understood 'at the kitchen table' if there is to be any change. No single approach will work—Landcare will be 'it' for some, others will require outcome-base contracts, and still others will

have to be regulated. Whatever the particular mechanism, consistency, transparency and above all longevity will be key to success. If people engage in partnerships and long-term management processes, they should know that their efforts will be supported over time, and that they will have the resources, administrative capacity and power to keep at the task.

The key to best practice community participation might be complementary enabling legislation across all Basin jurisdictions, setting out planning frameworks and standards for statutory catchment plans.[8] This would give the Ministerial Council the means to ensure that Basin-wide targets are incorporated into competent plans, with clear implementation, investment and accountability requirements. These statutory plans would be forward looking and built around an investment framework for on-ground works (including the purchase of property rights), knowledge generation, monitoring and evaluation, and community participation.

We need to shift from a voluntary to a business approach to integrated catchment management.

If we implement the type of fair process outlined above, it will be possible (and I believe is expected) that it will lead to all participants being held accountable for their decisions and actions. This will mean the voluntary approach that has been characteristic of the actions of individuals and communities in the Basin over the last decade or so is no longer appropriate. It will mean that ICM can no longer be treated as a 'feel good community engagement project' as it has to date by many government and community players alike.

The shift to a business approach raises many questions about the institutional arrangements at the catchment level. Should the community process be advisory only? If so, how will the advice be treated in a way that builds trust and brings outcomes? If the responsibility for the proposed statutory plans is to be vested in representative catchment management authorities, what powers and resources will these bodies need to enter into contracts with individuals, local governments and state agencies for delivery of the outcomes? How will these bodies raise revenue? Should members be appointed by government or should they be properly elected? How could such elections take place—through the existing local government electoral process, or should members be drawn from the rural private sector or more broadly than that? Serious debate on such options must happen if community/government partnerships are to be accountable, effective and valued by communities in the Basin.

Conclusion

The threads that link across us across time, space and culture in the Murray-Darling Basin are rivers and people. The concept of integrated catchment management has evolved to 'embrace' this duality and gives increased emphasis to the human aspects of managing the Basin's scarce and degraded natural resources.

The current Integrated Catchment Management Policy for the Basin is at minimum a rhetorical attempt to provide assurance that partners are committed to providing the four things required to build trust:

- credible knowledge that is made available to all who want it
- fair process for decision-making at all scales (Basin, catchment and local)
- accountability at all levels for decisions and their implementation
- developing leadership and other skills at all levels.

While the document articulates a high benchmark, hopefully as governments and communities embrace a more business-like approach to ICM based on shared values and principles, the policy will become far more than rhetoric.

What lies ahead? Some of the impediments to moving forward arise because people feel threatened by change, no matter how sensible it is. In other cases the issue is refusal to share power. It is time to cast aside some of the sacred cows, identify that which is good, bring definition to the rhetoric of participatory governance and build stable but flexible arrangements that work as well for the Basin as for the individual. Although the commitment to and understanding of genuine public participation is in its infancy, the human dimension and public participation in resource management must certainly preoccupy us in the future.

Finally, if we are genuine about the catchment being the appropriate management unit in the Basin, then we must think about how we align the powers and responsibilities of catchment bodies, local governments, state and Commonwealth agencies and innovative new bodies like vegetation banks and environmental flow trusts. Perhaps it is time for genuine integration of activities that impact the resource base at the catchment scale, with appropriate powers and accountabilities for their management assigned to this level.

Endnotes

[1] Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council 2002, *The Living Murray: a discussion paper on restoring the health of the River Murray*, Murray-Darling Basin Commissoin, Canberra.

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[5] Chenoweth, J, Ewing, S, & Bird. J 2002, 'Procedures for ensuring community involvement in multijurisdictional river basins: a comparison of the Murray-Darling Basin and Mekong River Basins', *Environmental Manager*, vol 29, no. 4, pp. 497-509.

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