

# The Wentworth Group and the great water debate

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The drought was remorseless. It hammered the landscape, hapless farming families and rural communities. It dumped megatonnes of topsoil on Australia's cities, enforced water rationing and drove up food prices.

Across the nation sympathetic citizens put hands in their pockets to help struggling farmers through the crisis. Echoing an age-old pioneer dream, business and media figures cried for the rivers to be turned inland, to water the parched plains and "drought-proof the continent".

The scientists who had gathered for dinner at Sydney's Wentworth Hotel were appalled, not merely at the drought and the human suffering. But at the stark fact that Australia, with the best of intentions, seemed willing to make the same mistakes all over again – taxing its water and soils beyond their natural limits, dooming future generations of farmers to suffer and the nation to unsustainability.

As eminent figures in Australian landscape science they knew, better than any, the true extent of the depletion of the continent's life-sustaining resources. They knew that to prop up failing systems only leads to greater misery and irreversible loss to future generations. They saw the time was ripe to intervene, in a way that neither governments, farmers, the public, nor the media could ignore.

Environmental scientists, by and large, are accustomed to going unheeded. Nobody loves a Hanrahan (O'Brien), and nobody likes being told they are despoiling their homeland. Politicians, as a rule, are allergic to scientists who draw public attention to failures of policy.

The Wentworth group was determined not to suffer the same fate. As individuals they had sounded warnings - about water in particular - to limited effect for decades. The drought put all their admonitions in the spotlight. With immaculate timing, they determined not to waste the

moment. In the process they launched a new phenomenon in the formulation of Australian public policy – the unpaid, independent expert group.

Professor Peter Cullen, Dr John Williams, Professor Hugh Possingham, Professor Tim Flannery, WWF policy specialist Peter Cosier, Associate Professor Ronnie Harding, Professor Mike Young, Professor Bruce Thom, Dr Dennis Saunders, Dr Steve Morton and farmer Ms Leith Bouilly were distinguished names in any case. But they took precautions, nonetheless.

“We did the opposite of what scientists usually do when they sit down together – we focussed on what we could agree on, instead of what we disagreed about,” John Williams says.

“We spoke with a single, consistent voice,” says Peter Cullen. “We kept the messages few, and simple to understand. We delivered them primarily through the media – but we also made sure that governments had forewarning of what we were going to say.

“Also, we made sure we had answers – not just problems. Too many environmental groups paint themselves into a corner by hand-wringing and saying ‘isn’t it dreadful?’”

The group’s scientific credentials were key to their trustworthy and objective image, but equally important was the fact that they had nothing personal to gain - the opposite in fact. This gave them a credibility with the media and public in particular which many policy bodies, lobby groups, NGOs and paid think-tanks lack. No grant, personal payment or subsidy was involved. Many of the group were also nearing the end of their careers, and so were more bullet-proof than their junior peers.

But the secret of the group’s impact on the media and public debate about water and the environment, by all accounts, lay with a journalist who, after listening for an hour or more in rising frustration to a convoluted scientific debate about water finally burst out: “What the hell are you people doing here if you can’t tell us what the situation is, and what we should do about it?”

The interjection crystallised the scientists’ minds wonderfully, causing them to focus on five issues they could all agree were of absolute national urgency:

- the need to clarify water property rights
- restoration of environmental water flows
- ending broadscale landclearing
- paying farmers for their environmental services
- removing hidden subsidies from the cost of food, fibre and water.

These formed the punchlines for their hard-hitting *Blueprint for a Living Continent* (2002).

It wasn't rocket science and it wasn't even new. It built on, and lent fresh impetus to core ideas about what should be done evolved in Landcare, the National Heritage Trust and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality, among many others. But it delivered a public receptiveness that gave policymakers a chance to move forward.

It was also radical, in proposing a fundamental rethink of how we treat the Australian continent: "We need to learn to live with the landscape, not fight against it all the time," says Peter Cullen

"Over the past decade there had been profound changes in the way we thought about Australia, and some great initiatives and ideas about managing our natural resources," says Peter Cosier.

"So it was important to recognise that we were not starting with a blank piece of paper, and to give credit to the political leaders, farmers and Landcare movement who have tried to identify new ways of managing the Australian landscape."

"We really tried to avoid being prescriptive, as so many groups had in the past," John Williams adds. "We wanted to identify the key issues and principles – and then let others take ownership of them and work out their own solutions. We tried to be pragmatic, yet optimistic. We also recognised there were many things we did not know."

The group's media counsellors told them to keep it simple – even if the issues themselves were complex. "The media in particular appreciated this. I think they welcomed an approach that both sounded sensible and straight forward and offered solutions, not just problems," says Williams

Politicians and senior public servants appreciated the group's willingness to brief them on what they planned to say, instead of merely lobbing political bombshells. Support from senior Ministers, heads of department and key policymakers was pivotal, with some seeing the Wentworthers as a useful ginger group to lend the issue of the Australian landscape and the condition of its natural resources an overdue urgency.

The fact that they were outside the usual interest lobbies – farmers, environmental NGOs, think-tanks funded by industry, politics or ideology – gave the Wentworth Group a cleanliness that made their advice more palatable to government and the public, though it did not immunise them against criticism and sniping. Other scientists dubbed their views "utopian", accusing them of making "profoundly ideological statements cloaked in the authority of science" (Lane et al 2004).

## **Conclusion**

The Wentworth Group sees an immense task ahead: to help the nation evolve a truly Australian way of living and producing, compatible with the continent's natural endowments and character. It is contemplating extending its actions into issues such as climate change and energy.

"Unless society has ways to hear the uncomfortable advice it needs to hear, its survival is at risk. A society without eldership able to speak disinterestedly and freely, has long-term problems with survival," John Williams warns.

## References

Lane MB, McDonald GT and Morrison T 2004, Decentralisation and environmental management in Australia: a comment on the prescriptions of the Wentworth Group, *Australian Geographical Studies*, 42(1):102-114.

Taken from the Australian bush poem 'Said Hanrahan' by J P O'Brien (P J Hartigan). The character Hanrahan is the ultimate pessimist. See <http://www.bushverse.com/o'brien/hanrahan.htm> for the full poem.

Wentworth Group 2002, *Blueprint for a Living Continent* A way forward from the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists, WWF Australia