INLAND RIVERS NETWORK

Inland Rivers Network Newsletter - October '24 Focus : Connectivity

Welcome to the Inland Rivers Network (IRN) Newsletter launched in National Water Week. The theme for 2024 Water Week is *Accelerating Action.* This edition is focusing on the critical need for the NSW Government to accelerate action on saving the Darling/Baaka by adopting all the recommend-ations handed down by the Connectivity Expert Panel in July this year.

IRN applauds the NSW Government initiative to establish the Connectivity Expert Panel with terms of reference to provide independent advice on issues relating to flow targets and water access rules in water sharing plans that influence inflows to the Darling/Baaka.

Connectivity in water sources occurs at a number of levels:

- Longitudinal connectivity refers to surface flows through tributaries to downstream
- Lateral connectivity refers to surface flows onto floodplains
- Vertical connectivity refers to recharge and discharge of groundwater sources
- Social connectivity includes First Nations spiritual connection to land and water

Connected healthy rivers and wetlands support tourism and recreation, particularly nature-based tourism, community health and well-being. The Darling/Baaka is the key connection between the Northern and Southern basins of the Murray-Darling system.

A recent meeting between IRN members and water staff from the Department of Climate Change, Energy, Environment and Water (DCCEEW) indicated that the NSW Government may not adopt any or all of the recommendations of the Connectivity Expert Panel aimed at improving flows into the Darling/Baaka.

This is not good enough and we expect that the survival of this significant connecting river system and the communities who rely on it, especially First Nations people, will be given top priority. In fact, the NSW Premier and Water Minister have previously committed to this outcome.

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Image: Mum in the dry bed of the Darling/Baaka River early 00's - Mel Gray

Call for urgent implementation of Expert Panel's advice to rescue Northern Basin rivers

The horrific Menindee fish kills have brought attention to the critical state of the Darling/Baaka River's eco-system. While the NSW Government has acknowledged the crisis, the lack of urgency in implementing the Connectivity Report's recommendations raises concerns.

The Darling/Baaka River continues to suffer and experts warn that without prompt action, the river's rapid ecological decline will persist. Effective management and restoration efforts are crucial for reversing these trends and protecting the Basin's biodiversity.

In response to the Menindee fish kills, NSW Water Minister, Rose Jackson, convened the Connectivity Expert Panel to address water flow management.

The Connectivity Expert Panel, formed after the devastating Menindee fish kills, proposed changes to water extraction rules in the Northern Basin.

The Northern Basin is a vast area that encapsulates all the rivers in NSW west of the dividing range that eventually feed into the Barwon Darling Baaka.

Set in an arid, low-rainfall area the Darling/Baaka is heavily reliant on its tributaries for its flows. The main catchment areas or valleys in NSW include the Gwydir, the Border Rivers, the Namoi and the Macquarie Wambuul. Each of these valleys have their own water sharing plan, which determines water use within the valley, but historically, rules in these water sharing plans haven't been sufficient to protect flows downstream, and this has contributed to the Darling/Baaka River below Bourke experiencing more frequent and longer dry periods and poor water quality."

The Final Report of the Expert Panel has noted that current water management strategies often fail to maintain essential connectivity, particularly during dry periods. Instead, the panel advocates for a more comprehensive approach to water management that ensures adequate connectivity not only during droughts but also when water is more plentiful. This aims to enhance the resilience of the ecosystem to withstand dry spells.

The panel highlights **the importance of a precautionary approach to water sharing**, emphasizing that environmental and downstream community needs must be prioritized. The current framework is seen as overly focused on regulating upstream users, neglecting the ecological and social implications downstream.

The recommendation is for a more balanced strategy that **addresses risks comprehensively across the entire river system**.

The recommendations include:

- base flow most of the time.
- small annual flush.
- A larger flush every two years.

Implementing these changes would require only a 4-6% reduction in water extraction, but independent oversight was recommended to ensure transparency.

The NSW Government's response, outlined in the document "Building the pathway to improved northern basin connectivity', has been met with criticism for rejecting independent oversight and its lack of urgency, with key actions delayed until July 2026.

Minister Rose Jackson came to office promising: "The Minns Government is committed to enabling decision making that is guided by science and the principles of the Water Management Act to provide sustainable management of NSW water resources that benefits present and future generations."

The former Government dropped the ball, eroding trust in water management and letting down local communities….. having strong public confidence in how we manage water is critical".(November 2023)

Image: Straw-Necked Ibis chick – K Brandis

On the ground in Menindee Minister Jackson committed to "not only get to the bottom of what happened with the fish deaths, but also what we can do in the future to prevent them. "The government will begin work immediately on actions to lower the risk of further fish deaths this summer.

Following the Menindee fish kills, Premier Chris Minns emphasized the need for a forward-looking approach to water management in regional NSW:

"We need to look at water management in regional NSW across the board. I don't have any interest in retribution or holding people to account for previous decisions. All that matters to me is the future and making sure that we get the policies right and in place to make a difference to the ecology of this river and to the people that live on it." (SMH 29 May 2023)

Despite these strong commitments, concerns remain that without independent oversight and a more urgent timeline, these promises may not lead to the necessary policy changes to prevent further fish kills.

Call for Urgency on River Connectivity

Bev Smiles, from the Inland Rivers Network, expressed concern that the government's approach lacks the urgency needed to prevent further ecological collapse: "Appropriate and timely connectivity is essential, not just to protect downstream critical human needs, but also to protect cultural values and ecological resilience."

Environmental groups, First Nations communities, and river advocates stress the importance of implementing the Connectivity Report recommendations, especially around independent oversight of water flow modelling. Independent oversight is vital to ensure that the new water-sharing rules are based on accurate data and transparent analysis.

The Connectivity Report offers a clear plan to protect the Darling/Baaka River by adjusting water extraction rules, but the NSW Government must act swiftly. Much more needs to be done, and sooner, to avoid further fish kills and preserve the ecological, cultural, and economic health of the region.

The NSW Government must accelerate the timeline to implement the report's recommendations and restore independent oversight to ensure the long-term protection of the Darling/Baaka River.

Take Action today:
https://naturensw.good.do/stopthefishkills/savethebaaka/

Image: Fish River (Wambuul) Tracey Carpenter

First Nations Water Rights

The Barkandji and Malyangapa People were granted native title rights over traditional lands and water in 2015. The Darling/Baaka River is the lifeblood of this country and its people. The recognition and provision of First Nations water rights is an ongoing battle at the regional and Basin-wide level. All Governments have been too slow to include First Nations knowledge in water management and have failed to meet water sharing commitments.

The health of the First Nations communities along the river is intrinsically connected to the health of the river and to water flows. Fishing for food is also an integral part of traditional community life.

The spiritual and cultural connection to land and water will be enhanced through improved river flows and access to First Nations water rights. Barkandji Native Title Aboriginal Corporation RNTBC

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Rivers in Ecological Crisis

Mass fish kills and shrinking populations of waterbirds have been reported. The Murray-Darling Basin has been particularly impacted, with only a small fraction of promised environmental water flows being delivered. The biodiversity decline in the Murray-Darling Basin is significant, particularly affecting aquatic and bird species. Recent assessments indicate that over 80% of the river valleys in the Basin are in poor or very poor health, largely due to reduced water flows caused by climate change, over-allocation for agriculture, and habitat degradation The region has seen a notable increase in the number of plants and animals classified as threatened. In the past decade, 377 species have been added to the list of national significance.

Native fish urgently need more connecting flows, not just remnant still pools. Flows in the Barwon, Darling Baaka and some other rivers have been reduced so much that fish populations cannot recover. These rivers need frequent and prolonged good flows that maintain connectivity through riffles and pools - flows from the upper parts of their catchments with higher rainfall and through to the Lower Murray. Periods of increased flow stimulate migration of many fish species for breeding or dispersal. The aquatic invertebrate animals on which many native fish feed also need flows that oxygenate and expand their habitats. Restoring the naturally varying pulses of connecting flows that should follow rain events in river catchments is necessary in years of normal and high rainfall when fish should be growing, breeding and rebuilding their populations, as well as to enable survival through droughts. (Our next edition will spotlight declining fish and aquatic life).

Bird Populations: Birdlife in the Basin has experienced dramatic reductions as well. The Eastern Waterbird Survey spanning thirty years revealed a 70% decline in waterbird populations, including pelicans and black swans, primarily due to decreased water availability. The construction of dams and the diversion of water for irrigation have severely impacted the wetlands that serve as critical habitats for these species. Currently, 35 species of birds are listed as endangered in the region.

Water Availability: The ongoing extraction of water for agriculture has disrupted the delicate balance of water flows necessary for maintaining healthy ecosystems. Reports indicate that due to over-extraction, both large flood events and smaller, regular flows essential for ecosystem health are being diminished

Climate Change Impact: Projections indicate that climate change will lead to decreased rainfall and higher evaporation rates including over oceans, potentially resulting in a catastrophic decline in flows alternating with destructive deluges and flooding. The situation in the Murray-Darling Basin serves as a stark reminder of the complex interactions between human activity and natural ecosystems. Effective management and restoration efforts are crucial for reversing these trends and protecting the Basin.