



Netting lungfish eggs at a spawning site on the Burnett River. The Dam will inundate these shallow, weedy reaches of the river specially chosen for lungfish for breeding. Credit: Jean Joss

Where wild things are dammed

Growing protests surrounding the Paradise Dam project under construction on the Burnett River in south-east Queensland illustrate the public's concern that both federal and state governments can still override sustainable development priorities, conservation legislation, community consultation, and expert scientific knowledge, for the sake of local economic growth and political expediency. They also question the necessity for the more dams on Australia's remaining untamed rivers.

In reference to any new environmentally based developments, the *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) states that 'conservation of biological diversity and ecological integrity should be a fundamental consideration in decision-making'. That principle is supposedly a central tenet in the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) water reform agenda¹, however, it is the community and academia that appear to be leading the initiative for conservation and sustainable development, battling government every step to do so.

The Paradise Dam project, subsequently

renamed less sensitively as the Burnett River Dam, has been proposed since the 1960s to assist regional irrigated production, but was rejected by state government assessments in 1997 as unviable.² Then, during public consultation hearings on water infrastructure in the Burnett River during the late 1990s, Paradise Dam was ranked 29 out of 30 possible projects, with desalination and wastewater reuse being favoured options.³

In 2000, the Burnett River Water Allocation and Management Plan (WAMP), undertaken by the state government, found that only a further 65 000 megalitres per year could be extracted from the river before serious environmental damage would occur.⁴ This was then backed-up in the same year by legislation in the *Queensland Water Act 2000*.

During the 2000 Queensland election campaign, however, the Queensland National Party made an election promise to build Paradise Dam to win the seats of Bundaberg and Burnett. Premier Peter Beattie then counter-pledged that, if elected, Labor would build Paradise Dam and several other smaller impoundments

on the Burnett.⁵ Combined, these infrastructures will reserve 201 845 megalitres of water a year from the catchment⁶, more than three times the recommended limit set by the WAMP.

The project's implementation was supported by state Labor, the National's and the federal coalition government. The dam site was in Federal Agriculture Minister Warren Truss's seat of Wide Bay, and was also backed by the Federal National Party member for Burnett, Paul Neville. The dam was apparently supported to guarantee water supply for massive expansion in agriculture and employment in the region.

After quickly announcing the project would go ahead, the Beattie Government formed a new company, Burnett Water Pty Ltd, which, according to the Minister for State Development, Tom Barton, was needed to fast-track the environmental impact study⁷ and build the dam.

After realising that the amount of water earmarked for extraction would breach the 2000 Water Act, the Beattie Government then amended the legislation, twice, to reduce the amount of water needed for environmental flows, and weaken the regulations to protect the threatened endemic lungfish (*Neoceratodus forsteri*) in the river.

The Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the \$200 million dollar project was conducted as a desktop study in just four months, and included economic assessments of the project, outlining the creation of over 7000 jobs and increased agricultural production in the region to the value of over 1 billion dollars per annum.⁸

While this was going on, the Queensland Treasury released 'Treasury comments on economic viability of water allocation scenarios for the Burnett Basin', which found that the Paradise Dam project was economically unviable. The government then made this assessment a cabinet document, thereby removing it from public scrutiny under the Freedom of Information Act.

The Queensland Environmental Protection Agency was proactive in commissioning the Institute for Sustainable Futures at the University of Technology, Sydney, to undertake a Least Cost Planning Study for the Burnett region.⁹ The study provided detailed alternatives to the Paradise Dam, including off-stream storages and water efficiency measures for both agriculture and domestic use throughout the whole catchment.

The alternatives, the report claimed,

1 COAG water reform agreement Clause 4.

2 Queensland Conservation Council Rivers Alive report (November 2002) quoting the Final Report of Water Infrastructure Taskforce, 28 February 1997.

3 A multi-objective decision support system for the Burnett Basin. Qld. Dept. Natural Resources, 2000.

4 Burnett Basin Water Allocation and Management Plan. Ecological Implications of Draft WAMP Scenarios. Qld. Dept. Natural Resources, 2000.

5 Media release from Premier Beattie 24 January 2001.

6 Burnett Basin Resource Operations Plan, Queensland DNR&M, May 2003, Page 39.

7 Media release from Tom Barton, 15 May 2001. Hansard, Wed. 12 December 2001.

8 *Water Infrastructure Development (Burnett Basin) Act 2001*, and *Water Infrastructure Development (Burnett Basin) Amendment Act 2001*.

9 *Burnett Region Least Cost Planning Study* prepared by Institute for Sustainable Futures for The Queensland Government Environmental Protection Agency. Final draft report, March 2002.

would in fact offer more jobs than the dam option, and less environmental impact, cheaper water to the farmer, and importantly, capacity building for water users to understand and control water on their properties. Again, the Beattie Government also made this study a cabinet document, avoiding public scrutiny.

Whilst academic opinion has been solidly against Paradise Dam, industry and public support was initially mixed. Inland irrigators have been divided amongst those who believe all dams are worthwhile, and those who realise the river is already fully allocated and that inland delivery will be reduced to redirect water to the coastal electorates. Coastal irrigators, including the sugarcane industry, likely to be the major benefactors of the dam, have supported the project wholeheartedly. That is until some realised that the costs of the new water will actually be beyond their means.

The local fishing industry, however, has opposed the dam as they see their livelihoods further threatened by reduced river flows necessary for fish spawning.

Biologists and environmentalists have been attempting for some years, in vain, to bring the facts of the stark ecological issues into the public arena and back to politicians. The Burnett River is home to scientifically important, threatened species – particularly the Queensland lungfish, Coxen's fig parrot, and an undescribed freshwater snapping turtle – but this has seemingly had little impact on the Queensland Government, or the former Federal Minister for the Environment, Dr David Kemp and successor Ian Campbell.

The lungfish is a unique and internationally-heralded evolutionary link, and Professor Jean Joss of Macquarie University, a renowned lungfish expert, is adamant about its global significance, saying recently in *Wildlife Australia*, '... we must ensure that their shallow spawning sites are protected now ... to provide recruitment to this invaluable source of information about the transition of vertebrate animals from water to land 350 million years ago, including even our own ancestry'.



The Queensland lungfish carries unique genetic links back to the evolution of land-based creatures. Ecologists are sceptical that a fish ladder being engineered by Burnett Water Ltd to facilitate movement of lungfish, will work. *Zoology*

Dr Kemp signed off federal approval for Paradise Dam whilst already holding a report from his own department's Threatened Species Scientific Committee recommending that the Queensland lungfish be listed as 'vulnerable' under the EPBC Act.¹⁰ It appears Dr Kemp released the Scientific Committee's recommendations after his approval for the dam therefore requiring only a variation in documentation for the dam's development. However, while the scientific committee identified loss of spawning sites as a major threat to lungfish¹¹, the Minister did not include protection of these sites in his variation.¹²

Similarly, the last sightings of Australia's rarest parrot, the Coxen's fig-parrot, listed as a critically endangered sub-species, occurred within the Paradise Dam impoundment zone. A pair was seen in September 2003 upstream from the dam site, and another pair was seen in December 2003 at the site of the dam

itself.¹⁴ The Coxen's is so rare that no photograph of it exists, and there are none in captivity. In 2000 it was assumed that less than 100 birds remained.¹⁵

The EIS for the dam noted the Coxen's had been sighted in the area but this was given no serious consideration. Burnett Water Pty Ltd is currently clearing all vegetation from the banks of the Burnett River, including the excised Goodnight Scrub National Park, removing vital habitat of Australia's rarest parrot.

Under no circumstances can the construction of Paradise Dam and the destruction of 45 kilometres of the Burnett River already with 30 impoundments, be said to be a sustainable development.

As Jean Joss observes, 'Surprisingly, more than \$500 million of taxpayers' money is being spent to fix up the Murray and yet millions more are now being spent to start the same damaging alteration of the Burnett River'.

Upon confrontation with a leaked copy of the Burnett Least Cost Planning Study the former Queensland Minister for the Environment, Dean Wells, said on radio 'If there's an election undertaking, then that overrides any studies that might be done, any academic papers ... all of these things can be put to good use to guide better decision making and future decision making, ... [but] if something is undertaken in an election then that should be implemented because that promise overrides any other second thoughts that you might have in almost all circumstances'.¹⁶

The case of Paradise Dam's politically engineered development contrary to both internal and external assessments, prescribed public legislation, and public consultation is, unfortunately, not an isolated case. When the increasing gravity of environmental priorities is clear to anyone, the continuing internal disregard for public policy and priority from elected representatives is of grave concern.

● **Graeme Armstrong**

More information:

Queensland Government overview of the Burnett River Dam development: www.sd.qld.gov.au/dsdweb/htdocs/global/content.cfm?id=13446

Graeme Armstrong has researched the undescribed snapping turtle (Elseya sp.) in the Burnett River and works as an ecological consultant to conservation and community groups. He has been invited to become a member of the Queensland Department of Primary Industries & Fisheries team undertaking the Lungfish Recovery Plan on behalf of the Federal Department of Environment & Heritage.

10 Confidential pers. comm. with a source in the Dept. Env. and Heritage, and a dated letter. Professor Joss made the submission for listing, via correct channels, within the stipulated 90-day assessment period, well ahead of the Dam's approval date. Upon listing the lungfish as threatened under the EPBC Act the Minister made the Variation of Approval for the dam. Professor Joss did not receive notification of the listing or variation until 28 days after the event – outside the time allowed by the Federal court to challenge a decision (in this case the variation of approval). The letter of notification, which Professor Joss received from the Federal DEH and Minister Kemp was curiously undated.

11 Advice to the Minister from the Threatened Species Scientific Committee on Amendments to the list of Threatened Species under the EPBC Act 1999. DEH website.

12 Variation of conditions of approval. Commonwealth of Australia EPBC Act 1999. Gazetted 6/8/03.

13 *The Australian*, 24 May 2004.

14 Personal observations by myself and Lyndy Marshall reported to and accepted as valid by Ian Gyntner, Coxen's Fig-Parrot Recovery Team.

15 Action Plan for Australian Birds 2000. Dept. Env. Heritage and Birds Australia.

16 ABC Radio WideBay News, 29 July 2003. Interview between Bruce Honeywill and Minister Dean Wells.