



Lake Mulwala, formed by the Murray at Yarrawonga Weir (above), serves the diverse interests of different community groups. Gregory Heath, CSIRO Land and Water

A community airs its views about water access

While federal and state governments battle for ‘ownership’ of the Murray River, there is at least one place along the watercourse where the local community is able to register its concerns about access to water.

Unlike many bodies of water that have shrunk after prolonged drought, Lake Mulwala – formed by the Murray at Yarrawonga Weir – remains at a near-constant level. It is used as a drinking water supply, a recreational and lifestyle amenity for the rapidly developing Victorian town of Yarrawonga, and an irrigation source on both the New South Wales and Victorian sides of the border.

To better understand the diverse benefits of water for different communities – townspeople, indigenous people, irrigators and tourists – CSIRO’s Water for a Healthy Country Flagship has undertaken a Water Benefits Accounting and Assessment (WBAA) case study of Lake Mulwala.

The Lake Mulwala area was chosen because of the complexity of the issues and conflict about use of the lake.

In 2002 more than 3000 of the town’s 4800 people attended a meeting about the future of the lake, demonstrating the concern felt about the lake’s – and the region’s – future.

A shared concern of residents and lake users on both sides of the border were issues of environmental improvement and lifestyle.

‘The overwhelming problem for most of our survey respondents is how to balance development while maintaining the quiet country atmosphere that attracted people here in the first place,’ says CSIRO’s Dr Geoff Syme.

A familiar and difficult issue is access to the lake foreshore. The survey pinpointed the need for greater clarity and consistency about permissible activities on the lake and the foreshore, and resolution of competing demands for land and access.

‘Long-term residents, local farmers and visitors have all developed a high level of commitment and a strong personal connection with Lake Mulwala,’ says Dr Syme.

‘Not surprisingly, foreshore residents feel they have some ownership rights, but there’s general agreement that growth, including tourism, is going to happen, and the community needs to be prepared for the inevitable.’

The survey also showed that Indigenous people felt excluded and disenfranchised from decision making. Further, the entire community expressed concern about upstream activities, whether in Victoria

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or New South Wales, and their effects on river health.

‘People clearly want to get a better understanding of the health of the lake, and the effects of what happens there on downstream communities and the environment,’ adds Dr Syme.

The flagship study was supported by Goulburn–Murray Water, River Murray Water and the Community Reference Group (CRG). The CRG has the task of building confidence in the Lake Mulwala Land and On-Water Management Plan, developed to guide future management of the lake.

The case study provides the CRG, local communities and local water managers with some clear direction for immediate and long-term priorities in implementing the Plan to ensure maximum benefits for the community and the environment.

The study has also provided Water for a Healthy Country researchers with a test of the WBAA approach in understanding and accounting for the range of expectations about water use across different communities.

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More information:
McIntyre W, Tucker D, Green M, Syme G, Bates L, Porter N and Nancarrow B (2006). Water benefits accounting and assessment: Lake Mulwala case study. Water for a Healthy Country National Research Flagship Report, June.