

Reviews

Celebrating river champions around the world

'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful people could change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.'

These words by anthropologist Margaret Mead sum up the theme running through *River Journeys*, published last year by the Brisbane-based International Riverfoundation to celebrate the winners of the Thies Riverprize from 1999 to 2007.

The first international Riverprize was awarded to the Mersey Basin Campaign (MBC), a partnership between government, industry, universities and the community, which from the mid-1980s managed to turn the tide on 200 years of abuse and neglect that had transformed the river into 'an open sewer, devoid of biodiversity'.

MBC Chief Executive, Walter Menzies, reports that now 'porpoises, grey seals and fish have returned to formerly polluted stretches and juvenile salmon have been found in the upper reaches for the first time in living memory'.

The MBC's journey was not without its obstacles; in fact, *River Journeys* shows that any concerted attempt to 'turn the tide' anywhere has its fair share of problems, such as overcoming cultural differences (the Lower Mekong), large-scale modification of surrounding urban communities and environments (the Sha River in China) and, in Australia, conflicts between towns, irrigators and the environment over ever-dwindling river flows.

River Journeys also includes restoration projects in Canada, the USA, Israel and Europe. Australian waterways include Victoria's Goulburn-Broken catchment, New South Wales' Murray wetlands and Western Australia's Blackwood catchment.

Being a promotional publication, *River Journeys* does not present the full picture. For example, while it celebrates a cooperative agreement signed in 1995 between Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam on sustainable development of



River Journeys

International Riverfoundation, Australia

2008, Hardback

ISBN: 9780980554601 – AU\$39.95 + postage

<http://www.riverfoundation.org.au>

the Lower Mekong, it makes almost no reference to the recent alarming increase in plans for hydro-power schemes along the river since that time.

But if you're feeling a little overwhelmed by all the bad news about the environment in the media and are looking for some good news, this coffee-table book with its tales of river heroes and captivating photographs might just be the right medicine.

Water: commodity or human right?

Forget about peak oil. As the DVD *FLOW: For the Love of Water* dramatically illustrates, the most important resource crisis facing us in the 21st century is something no human can live without for more than a few days – potable water.

Just as *An Inconvenient Truth* opened the public's eyes to climate change, this film could well become an eye-opener for the developed world to get a new perspective on global water. More than two million people a year die from diseases carried in infected or polluted drinking water. Most are children under the age of five. Millions more suffer severe and chronic illness.

Lack of water, declining water quality, privatisation of water, displacement of millions through dam construction, 'water theft' by large corporations that literally bottle up local water supplies – all of these issues are touched on in this film, through a series of compelling case studies from both the developing and developed worlds.

The privatisation of water is a worrying trend for poorer countries such as Bolivia and South Africa which, according to *FLOW*, have been forced into privatising and centralising public water infrastructure as part of aid deals negotiated with bodies

such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF).

How can private companies deliver water to poor people – and deliver profits to shareholders at the same time? They don't, according to this documentary. When it comes to the crunch, the poorest are cut off from supply and forced to use water from polluted streams and rivers.

One expert interviewed for *FLOW* says: 'The World Bank knows how to spend \$1 billion in one place but does not know how to spend \$1000 in a million places or villages.'

In other words, the control and management of water needs to be scaled back to the local level. One US-based Indian scientist, for example, has developed a low-maintenance village water purification system based on ultra-violet



FLOW: For the Love of Water

DVD inc. film (84 min.) plus special features

Australian distributor: Ovation Shop

[www.ovationshop.com.au/browse/](http://www.ovationshop.com.au/browse/details.asp?ProdID=126032)

[details.asp?ProdID=126032](http://www.ovationshop.com.au/browse/details.asp?ProdID=126032)

AU\$29.95 + \$3.50 postage

light to kill pathogens. The cost per villager is less than US\$2 per year for safe drinking water.

The film ends with an example of another invention delivering fresh water to those who desperately need it – the PlayPump in South Africa. If you haven't heard of it before, go to the company's website (www.playpumps.org) and see how easy it can be to make water accessible to all.

● **Mary-Lou Considine**

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