



Visual art can speak to us in an entirely different way, opening new pathways for understanding and action. **Alexandra de Blas** reports on the Engaging Visions project which is documenting the environmental transformation taking place in the Murray–Darling Basin and how communities are coping with that change.

Engaging **visions of change**

‘Imagine Kakadu being reduced to 20 per cent of its biodiversity – well that’s what has happened here.’ Artist Gary Duncan has been using his artwork to campaign for the plight of native species suffering in his region for almost 30 years. Gary was my introduction to the Riverland, located on the Murray River in South Australia between Renmark and Waikerie.

Gary took me through his studio and then, as we sat on the Murray’s banks, he scrolled through a list of creatures that had disappeared. ‘It’s horrible,’ he said. ‘I still feel full of life, and everything around me I am watching is dying. It is like losing your children. That’s a terrible thing to say, but I guess it’s what it must feel like.’

I was in the Riverland to see Field Studies first hand, a program convened by John Reid at the Australian National University’s School of Art. It’s a program that enables artists to go out into the environment for 10 days at a time to find inspiration for their creative work.

Wherever possible they engage with local artists; Gary Duncan was one, and Yvette



Participating Aboriginal artist Dooley Lovegrove works with natural wood and bark from country to recreate and design traditional/contemporary ornamental artefacts. This is a smoking dish or platter. He interprets different dreamings in the landscape. Dooley Lovegrove/Engaging Visions/Dean Sewell

Frahn, who lives on a dryland cropping property, was another. Yvette radiated positivity and resilience as she ran morning art classes for local kids in a vacant shop front studio space in Renmark, which she has been sharing with two visiting artists. ‘When you get a bunch of young kids together and you give them materials to

work with, it’s extraordinary what they come up with; the influence of having the ANU artists in the class has been amazing.’

The Engaging Visions research project is fine-tuning the procedure for delivering the Field Studies program to the basin’s communities. Apart from the Riverland, the Engaging Visions team are testing the program at St George in Queensland, Tumut in New South Wales and Benalla in Victoria. The research is funded by the Australian Research Council and the Murray–Darling Basin Authority (MDBA).

The idea is to develop a 10-year plan for the MDBA to assist other art schools along the basin to conduct field studies and to continue the association between artists and communities over the longer term.

‘Creating visual art imagery is affirmatory,’ said Reid. ‘It can get the places where people are living and working onto the cultural record, and helps people to reflect on their attachment to place. It’s that attachment that affects how we prioritise and face the challenges that are obviously looming for all of us.’



Far left: An aerial view of the Murray River as it winds through the Riverland region of South Australia. Dean Sewell

Left: Dean Sewell's image of the Murray River at Mannum won the Moran Contemporary Photographic Prize. Dean Sewell

Right: Artist Kevin Whitta is buffeted by a dust-storm sweeping across the now bone-dry Lake Woolpoolool. Dean Sewell



'Visual art material also contributes to debates about environmental issues and can bring people together in the gallery space who haven't spoken for years.'

Social documentary photographer Dean Sewell is capturing the field studies process in each location, including the artists at work, the landscape and people in the community. In March he was awarded the prestigious \$80 000 Moran Contemporary Photographic Prize for an evocative drought-affected jetty image taken downstream of the Riverland.

I joined the artists who were staying on Calperum Station just outside Renmark. At dawn a group of photographers arose for a boat trip on Ral Ral Creek, one of the anabranches of the Murray. Despite a century of water regulation and changed flow regimes, and drought, frogs "pobble bonked" and birds darted overhead as we boarded the tinny and putted off into the misty grey-green morning, through channels and reed beds.

One couldn't escape the irony of drowned red gums collapsing into the creek bed, exposed to artificially high water levels feeding the irrigation supply. Dead before their time, their feet too wet for too long, while on the flood plain gums are dying from too little water. Both were weakened by the rising salt in the water table.

Calperum Station and neighbouring Taylorville Station, together 335 000 ha, form part of the vast Riverland Biosphere Reserve, managed by the Australian Landscape Trust. The properties are recognised for their extensive mallee woodlands, critical habitat for the endangered black-eared miner, and

their Ramsar listed wetlands, vital for migratory birds.

Dr Grant Whiteman, Manager of Riverland Operations for the Trust, took me to the two lakes at the western end of the Ramsar site to show me a microcosm of the problems occurring along the length of the basin. The lakes were bone-dry; not what I expected of an internationally significant bird breeding site.

Wetting and drying was part of the natural process in these lakes prior to river regulation, but this was a different story – a



Vida Sumner with one of the 50 modified trees around Lake Bonney which interpret the landscape for Aboriginal people. Dean Sewell

case of too many demands and not enough water to go around. 'We need a significant amount of environmental water for these lakes,' said Whiteman, 'it simply isn't available now.'

As well as Ramsar listing, these wetlands are covered by migratory bird agreements with Japan and China. 'So they're essential if we're going to keep those bird populations alive. Most disturbing to me is that the long-term availability of water will

decrease as we move into a more drought prone, climate change affected world,' Dr Whiteman said.

Other lakes in the Riverland are also changing. Eighteen months ago Lake Bonney, near Bamera, had its water supply shut off. The lake is receding, the water is turning saline and turtles are dying.

On the northern edge of the lake beside a 'ring tree', we met Vida Sumner, a Walkandi Woni Ranger overseeing cultural heritage at Lake Bonney, and one of two indigenous artists whose work was shown at the Engaging Visions exhibitions at Renmark in March. Known locally as 'the lookout tree', the 1000-year-old red gum exhibits the ancient craft of cultural modification which alerted travelling tribes as to who was allowed access on to country.

There are over 50 such modified trees around Lake Bonney. 'Even though they were killed when the lake was inundated they still hold important knowledge for us that lets our people understand the cultural landscape of this country,' Ms Sumner explained.

While the ANU artists, such as Fran Ifould, were surprised to see how dire things had become, they were also hopeful about the potential of Engaging Visions. 'At least we can act as a sounding board for the people here and help take their story about the plight of the Riverland to a broader audience.'

More information:

Engaging Visions catalogue, <http://riverland.engagingvisions.com.au/featured/riverland-catalogue>