

Proposal to set a new course for the Murray

Two Australian researchers have proposed transforming the River Murray into a smaller, narrower waterway to reduce evaporation losses and improve flows.



Credit: ScienceImage/Greg Rinder

Professor Mike Young from the University of Adelaide and CSIRO scientist Jim McColl say record-low inflows over the last three years have prompted them to ‘reconsider the river and the environment we have created through the installation of barrages, locks, weirs and dams’.

‘As it gets drier, an increasing proportion of inflows are required just to cover evaporative losses,’ they write.

‘A small reduction in mean rainfall, say 10 per cent, can lead to a 70 per cent reduction in the volume of water available for use.

‘One of the simplest ways to reduce losses is to build a bank or control structure so that water can be kept out of an area and evaporative losses reduced permanently.

‘Another way is to construct a bank across a lake and fill part rather than all of the lake.’

The two scientists point out their ideas are not new: for example, South Australia has already closed off more than 30 wetlands and moved many irrigation off-take points from backwaters into the main channel in the last two years; and Victoria has decommissioned the man-made Lake Mokoan to rehabilitate former wetland.

‘Deciding to close off part of a river system may sound a bit like triage – even if it is man-made,’ they continue.

‘In practice, however, this is really about the allocation and use of scarce resources for maximum benefit. Careful research, analysis and evaluation of trade-offs are necessary.

‘At the end of the day, one would expect some parts of the system to be kept inundated no matter how dry it gets, some

parts to be watered periodically, some parts to be watered only in very wet years and some parts to never be watered again.

‘Some probably never should have been watered.’

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