Lost Waters

A History of a Troubled Catchment

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Introduction: My Path to the River

When I first began to consider how people connect with their immediate waterways, I did not know how to find my local river. River geography was not in me even though I had lived in rural Victoria, Australia, for sixteen years and was someone who tuned into things environmental, or so I thought. And I did not understand how a river's water connected to rural towns and big cities. 'Water catchment' was a term I understood in its physical sense of boundaries directing water one way and not another. Appreciating that these same boundaries were bursting with social meaning was a revelation. As my path to the river was being hewn out in archival basements, water debates intensified. Water is increasingly attached to thinking about global warming and resource sustainability, with mini-debates being played out in community forums about how to increase security of supply to irrigators, towns and the environment.

I did know my local water had been considered a highly limited resource more than once in the past, and was keen to understand how prior partitioning occurred. My starting question was why water remained such a potent issue for farmers who clearly held the regional water supply authority in disregard. No simple answer related to the economic value of the water resource emerged. What follows is a set of historical narratives that track the experience of one catchment

community as water was gathered and channelled, as waterways were reconfigured and connections with waterscape weakened. I joined the first surveyors in examining the essential principle of transferring water between catchments, and considered the social consequences of it being assumed rather than debated, declared and evaluated. The narrative action is restricted to the highly stressed West Moorabool catchment near Ballarat in south-west Victoria, but it intersects, I hope, with water conflict farther afield.

As I investigated how the loss of water from a rural catchment across a divide to service an urban one transformed into a social divide, a second theme bubbled to the surface. Rivers, creeks, swamps and springs revealed themselves as transient historical entities that signified lost waters in a different sense. I discovered that rivers could disappear, not just into pipelines but also from our navigable physical world and our collective psychological terrain. Extensive river frontage was privileged to a few pastoral families. Local government and interested landholders colluded to close 'unused' roads that connected to waterways. Public water frontage was absorbed into farmland. Spring reserves were abandoned to become unrecognisable wastelands. Reservoirs were moved in and out of popular focus to pose as outdoor laboratories of scientific water management. These two narrative themes of water resource and waterscape loss became intertwined. Here was a community that increasingly held water central to its identity while connection with its waterways concurrently weakened.

This narrative of estrangement and loss is less pertinent for those cities of the Western world, including nearby Melbourne, that have recommitted to their local waterways, restoring their visibility and connection with urban dwellers. And the narrative is foreign to Australia's bigger rivers that are often showcased within national park reservations, known to visitors far and near. Rather, it concerns those many finer blue lines that cartographers use to represent inland water across rural land. The episodic transformation of West Moorabool's unallocated water into an overallocated catchment involved a realignment of people with the landscape of water, which has itself been rearranged. As this story of water transfer and water connections progressed, it bristled, increasingly, against the dominant scientific representations of waterways prevalent in our broader environmental culture.

There exists a massive public agenda concerning inland waters that has developed particular weight in Australia. Environmental agencies implore the public to care and help restore degraded rivers. Urgent ecological arguments are employed to convince dairy farmers to contain effluent, landowners to fence off wetlands, irrigators to use less water, and for all to revegetate unstable banks. They tell stories of how white settlers have sucked the rivers dry, infecting them with an overload of nutrients and sediment. They paint pictures of 'sick' and 'ailing' waterways in need of measures to restore them to good 'health'. Encouraging people to be close to inland water goes against this historical grain. There persists an unresolved tension between resource and landscape agendas—with one demanding distance and the other, intimacy—and with neither being satisfactorily addressed while considered to be disconnected.

The multiple resource management agencies that produce promotional advertisements and policies do not encourage people to directly experience the water they are being requested to respect. One central explanation for this conundrum is the hegemonic wedge that science drives between our natural and cultural worlds. These worlds are perceived as separate, overlapping when human necessity, as in the case of an urban water supply, dictates. Mitigating the negative impacts of this human intrusion into the natural domain is the agency mission that steers contemporary environmental agendas. Humans are assigned alien status. Their footsteps are discouraged from sinking into floodplain silt or river gravel. Or, to use a more popular metaphor, humans contaminate healthy ecosystems. The prevailing understanding of our natural world as a biophysical sphere in which people intrude or infect, rather than interact with, shape, and internalise into more personal environments of being, is of course itself historically derived. Its acceptance in the Western world is associated with the weakening of religious frameworks and the ascendancy of empirical scientific knowledge.

For a number of years a season of Ballarat district river walks has been organised by a local landcare network. Usually a dozen walkers arrive with provisions for a day's walk across farmers' paddocks and through bushy mazes with few worn paths to follow. Progress is slow for another reason. Individual plants in and near the water are sniffed and pawed until a botanical name seals the moment. It is recorded,

and the group lurches on to the next find. For the Moorabool there exists a growing body of knowledge about its riparian vegetation, its water quality, its wildlife and its distinct geomorphology. This knowledge is being gathered not only informally on river walks, but also through a statewide system of data collection measuring the relative biophysical dimensions of river systems reach by reach, with the process itself under periodic review. Using these measurements environmental professionals establish work priorities and apply for public funds to progress into the next working year. River health strategies remain un-satiated, no matter how generous the table of statistical offerings.

But this hunt for the definitive snapshot, or rather series of snapshots, seems strangely disconnected from the real world of people and places. Our imagination cannot feed on aquatic taxonomies. It requires a history of our past connections with water, a sense of how our values have shaped particular waterscapes and then ricocheted back into community life … what I refer to as a river's 'social flow'. Knowledge, memory and experience of water petitions, riverside picnics, special waterholes, creation stories with river resting places, sepia photographs and modern paintings, overhanging trees, slippery boulders, gold diggings and water races, allocation moments, submerged towns, frontage disputes, sandy bottoms and twiggy snags, are what connect people to place. A scientific understanding of changes in riparian vegetation, streamflow volume, and the physical form of bed and banks are strands of knowledge that can strangle our more central stories of the natural world.

This history of one rural water-stressed catchment asserts the need for social flow to be at the fore of water debates, alongside, but certainly not in place of, environmental flow. The idea of social flow emerges from the strength of environmental flow as an essentially scientific concept with broad acceptance, rather than from any preferred ideological distinction between the natural and cultural worlds. Recovering water for the environment—to secure an environmental flow—sounds like a simple affair, but scientists, farmers and resource managers in the heat of reallocation debates know otherwise. The provision of wild water for ducks and fish and platypus is not limited to the volume of water that slides from forested ranges to open sea. There are questions of water quality discrete from quantity, of when

and how water is released so that environmental benefits are maximised and supply requirements sustained, and perhaps most perplexing is the task of retrieving water when already more than the existing resource has been allocated. Similarly, social flow is not a simple matter of determining the amount of river water we need to fulfill our playful function as humans in a physical environment. Social flow is about recovering and securing the connections people have with their local waterscape, much the same as we conceptualise environmental flow as a sinuous blend of biophysical bonds.

Social flow, like its scientific partner, is tied to a golden past—when black fish were abundant and carp unknown, when elvers made it upstream unimpeded by dam walls, when the settlers' hut nestled on the treed bank without planning controls, and when Aboriginal camps feasted on plump black mussels in blissful ignorance of white invaders. The principle of strong physical and cultural connections can be promoted without the heavy millstone of a sometimes idealised and static past dragging the concept into impossible-hood. It is through the changing waterscape of West Moorabool that fluctuations in social flow are analysed with regard to the condition of our natural world, and with community capacity to link modern stories of river degradation, resource sharing and landscape creation. The water settlement history of this one rural catchment, so very bound by the urban sponge of nearby Ballarat, reveals a strengthening of water's identity as a physical resource and its diminution as a landscape entity. And the narrowness of our national and state water debates hints at a more widespread estrangement between people and waterways. Not only is our geography of water blurred, our imaginative powers to actively engage with wild watery places has shrunk. A disconnection from history, of water stories from less estranged times, is itself an impediment to a community's ability to imagine a more intimate rural scene.

I began this preface with a declaration of ignorance for my local waterways. I now know where the rivers, streams and springs are, even if I cannot clamber over electric fences to reach them. It has taken me much longer to understand how the geography of water has been altered. Once central and close to people's lives it now occupies the margins of landscape. This rural environment of estrangement is in curious contradiction to the fountain-like resurgence of water as a