The Committee Manager
Standing Committee on Environment and Planning
Parliament House, Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

SUBMISSION TO LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO ECOSYSTEM DECLINE IN VICTORIA

People for A Living Moorabool is grateful for the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry. The Moorabool River has long been recognised as the most flow-stressed in Victoria. Over-extraction of its waters along with the impacts of climate change have deeply imperilled its future. PALM has made numerous submissions to agencies, and inquiries such as this, calling for urgent action to address its plight. We believe that the Moorabool River represents a case study of the failure of both policy and governance to fully arrest obvious and quantifiable ecosystem deterioration.

However, among all the important data, all the literature, and all the other academic assessments, it is often easy to lose sight of the fact there are powerful eyewitness accounts of the decline of systems such as this. Below we present three accounts directly relating to our river.

Location: Gordon – a town in the upper part of the catchment

I am Aunty Marlene Gilson,

I am a traditional custodian of Wadawurrung country.

I have lived alongside the Paddock Creek in Gordon for over 48 years.

When we first come to live here, the river was much different.

There was an actual life-giving stream that included wildlife, aquatic life and animals as part of the ecosystem of the area.

These included platypus, eels (short-finned eels), different types of small fish, yabbies, water bugs and different coloured small frogs that I have never seen again after the seventies. They were as big as your fingernail and always lived in groups under rocks.

We had Bennetts tree kangaroo – must've been a mating pair – we have never seen them again.

Spotted quoll also walked these hills and the cadaver of one is in the government glasshouse building in their freezer, that was found along the highway here.

We used to see maybe 70 eels in the creek here, like river reeds, and always in abundance.

We don't see any of them now.

Not a single one. No fish, no platypus, yabbies … nothing.

Birds used to nest in the native grasses along the creek. My son is replanting them.

It seems like everything is just overgrown and not cared for anymore.

In all aspects of colonisation.

This creek, albeit a run-off of the Moorabool, is an important face of the decimation and what happens upstream also, sadly, happens downstream.

This has been in 45 years or so, an entirely different creek, barren and eel-less.

It's sad beyond words.

Marlene Gilson (Wadawurrung elder)

Context: Paddock Creek lies at the top of the Moorabool Catchment. The surrounding area makes heavy use of groundwater for agriculture. Over-extraction and climate change have resulted in groundwater levels falling markedly, no longer providing base flows to sustain rivers and creeks such as Paddock Creek. A Sinclair Knight Merz study done in 2004 estimated that every megalitre of water extracted from the Bungaree Groundwater Management zone resulted in 0.6 of a megalitre less groundwater expressing into the Moorabool River and its tributaries.

Location: Meredith – midway down the catchment

My name is Ian Penna.

I live on a 300-acre farm abutting the Moorabool River north east of Meredith. My family purchased the farm in 1975.

Although I was away from the farm for many years, memories and photo comparisons show that the condition of the Moorabool River and its surrounding land has changed markedly since the construction of the Bungal Dam on the west branch of the river.

The dam was filling during 1972 and 1973, so we arrived to see the river much as it was prior to its construction, which altered the river's natural flow regime and substantially reduced the amount of water flowing down the river.

The two most significant noticeable changes are the loss of the clean gravel beaches on the river bends and the increase in noxious weeds along the riverbanks.

The beaches have been replaced with noxious weeds, such as blackberries, gorse and spiny rush, as well as indigenous trees and bushes.

Gorse and blackberries have spread along the river and creeklines so that they can be a couple of metres high and several metres thick. We have reduced them on our farm through a great deal of continuing physical effort and the financial support of Landcare, the Corangamite CMA and the Moorabool Gorge Restoration Program.

The river was turned off 2007–08 when the level of Lal Lal Reservoir fell so much that all water was directed to Ballarat. Our section dried completely up. Some platypus have returned, but we don't know what the numbers are.

The Murghe-mur Creek flows from near Elaine and joins the Moorabool on our farm. In February 2011, a heavy dump of rain after 15 years of low rainfall meant the creek roared, causing severe erosion. It was so unusually vicious that it removed a pile of large basalt 'floater' rocks that had been dumped in the creek, possibly 80–100 years ago when land was cleared for agriculture. We wonder if this is a reflection of climate change and an indication of what is to come.

Until land management practices in the Murghe-mur Creek catchment are changed to slow rainfall run-off, our section of the creek will be subject to seriously damaging erosion. These flows and erosion will contribute to the sediment load in the Moorabool River.

I also think that the abundance of koalas in the river area has probably declined over the last 40 years. We no longer see them as regularly either around the river or the farm house, which is several hundred metres from the river.

Context: The Lal Lal Reservoir upstream of Meredith holds nearly 60,000ML of water. It is three times the size of the West Barwon Dam but on a river with one-third the flow. Its construction in the late sixties and early seventies has had a dramatic impact on the Moorabool River, highly modifying flows and causing the narrowing and choking of a substantial length of it. Average flows of 90ML per day have been reduced to just 10ML by the time it joins the Barwon. The proliferation of farm dams in the Moorabool catchment continues largely unabated and has resulted in the highest ratio of farm dam capacity to total annual available water of any Victorian river basin.

Location: Batesford – lower catchment near the confluence with the Barwon River

My name is Steve Powell.

I have lived in Batesford for most of my life where the lower reaches of the Moorabool run through.

I would like to share with everyone the close links many people from all walks of life have had with this once magnificent river and the relationship the Moorabool River has with people's lives.

As a boy this river was my playground: I fished and explored every nook and cranny of the Moorabool through and beyond Batesford. To be honest it is part of my soul and in a way created the person I am today.

But over the past 30 years I have watched it die due to massive demands placed on this beautiful river and, in my view, to the mismanagement of many government departments who exploited rather than looked after it.

There were plenty of favourite spots through Batesford where many people gathered to swim, fish, and just enjoy the beauty of the Moorabool River.

But for many years it would stop flowing and great sections became too dry too often. The fish life in these sections are all but gone from what I enjoyed as a boy. These large lengths were bone dry for many years in a row, breaking the link to upstream reaches and stopping migration of many species to the sea which they needed to spawn.

When I was young the quality of fishing in the Moorabool River brought a smile to my face, but now in these sections many species are dead. The once massive migrations of eel elvers I once watched as a boy are gone. They were in their hundreds of thousands. It is enough to make you cry.

In my view the once magnificent Moorabool River will never return to its former glory and I have grave fears for its future.

Context: The Fyansford Quarry sits downstream of Batesford near Geelong. The Moorabool River has been diverted twice to allow for access to further limestone deposits. The construction of the 1930s diversion is in serious disrepair, allowing large volumes of water to seep away through quarry spoil resulting in long sections of river bed without water. Declining overall flows have contributed substantially to this situation.

This loss of flow has dramatically reduced the yearly migration of native species, resulting in the river sections through Batesford and beyond being denuded of aquatic life. There have been numerous strandings of large numbers of fish in fast-emptying of pools near the quarry.

Conclusion

All three of these stories are connected by the one river. Everything done to alleviate the stresses felt by the river, and the ecosystems it supports, at any one particular location will likely be felt at the others. Allowing groundwater levels to recover and once again sustain waterways such as Paddock Creek will help with flows downstream at Meredith and at Batesford. Restoring the integrity of the bed of the river at Batesford will enable migratory species to repopulate the river upstream. Increasing environmental flow volumes from reservoirs such as Lal Lal will help stop weed encroachment and narrowing downstream at Meredith as well as assist in the passage of migratory species.

Unfortunately the siloing of responsibilities across the various agencies tasked with aspects of managing rivers such as the Moorabool stymie the application of system-wide perspectives.

PALM therefore strongly supports an approach which recognises rivers as single entities, with dedicated overseeing bodies. This approach would give voice to system-wide perspectives and drive co-ordinated recovery for blighted rivers such as the Moorabool and the ecosystems they struggle to support.

REFERENCES

Sinclair Knight Merz (2004): An assessment of water use and environmental flow requirements for the Moorabool River (Outcomes of the Moorabool Water Resource Assessment Project)

APPENDIX

About us

People for A Living Moorabool (PALM) is a completely grassroots alliance of individuals who gathered specifically to lobby for increased environmental flows and improved management of

water resources within the Moorabool River catchment, a system rightly considered the most flow-stressed in Victoria.

PALM was formed in April 2008 in response to the then extremely dire condition of the Moorabool River. Our charter reads:

> *Our group unites those who want to keep the full length of the Moorabool River alive. This one idea of a 'living Moorabool' is our guiding principle. It means that our commitment to be a voice for the river will override any support for the rights of particular water users. We have a single focus – the right of this magnificent, but highly stressed river, to an effective environmental flow. We are motivated by the politics of unity not division.*

mooraboolriver.org.au

People for A Living Moorabool
PALM
[redacted]