Welcome dear readers to the 10th edition of Wetland Dreamings and it is a great privilege to inform you of our recent award winning trip to Brisbane!

The MWWG was awarded the prestigious 2007 Thiess National River prize for its management of adaptive environmental water throughout the NSW Murray Valley.

Announced during the 9th International Riversymposium and Environmental Flows Conference, held in Brisbane in September, the River prize is the largest award in its field valued at AUD$100,000.

The MWWG was chosen from an outstanding field of finalists including Lake Macquarie in NSW, the Maroochy River in Queensland and Greening Australia’s national River Recovery Programme.

Mr. Howard Jones, Chair of the MWWG, said that winning the nation’s premium award of its kind was testament to the group’s emphasis on, and the value of, community involvement, and the vision of the NSW Government’s initiative in allowing an independent community-based group to manage environmental water.

“We are excited and privileged to receive the award and on behalf of all the individuals and agencies involved in the project, I would like to thank Thiess, the International Riversymposium, the International Riverfoundation and judges for awarding us this honour.

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Message from the Chairman.

“Like the preceding years, 2007 has been busy but I am pleased to report it has also been a very successful year for the Group.

“I would like to congratulate all the MWWG staff and members, past and present, on the Group’s win of the Thiess National Riverprize. It has been the combination of years of hard work, perseverance and sound support. I would like to thank Deb Nias and team for their efforts in putting together the award-winning nomination. Our challenge now is to capitalise on the win.

“As the drought continues the catastrophic consequences are a challenge to us all. With our floodplains and rivers in dire trouble I am not sure what we will have left on the drought’s break. However, we must retain our focus on what we can achieve to ensure, in many cases, that we are better prepared for when the break occurs.

“We have many projects happening and the Group continues to be recognised for its achievements and expertise, as well as invited to make comment on current water issues. The knowledge we hold and continue to gain will be essential in moving forward.

“We have had a change in staff, Duncan Vennell and Anna Chatfield have since moved on to new positions. I would like to thank them for their contributions to the Group and we wish them well. Welcome to Trish Bowen and Jess MacGregor who are filling in for Trish Alexander whilst she is on maternity leave. And last, but not least, congratulations to Trish and husband David on the arrival of their daughter Grace.

“As the year comes to a close I would like to wish all our readers and supporters well and I look forward to the new year ahead.”- Howard Jones

Major Projects Round-up.

The MWWG is currently involved in a number of differing projects. Listed below are a few of the major projects and information on their progress:

Lake Caringay Rehabilitation Project:
- Aquatic fauna and flora surveys have been completed by the Murray-Darling Freshwater Research Centre (MDFRC) and the MWWG (respectively) on a section of Washpen Creek, which feeds into Lake Caringay. The reports both indicate that a change in current water regime to a section of Washpen Creek is unlikely to have a detrimental impact on the present fauna and flora communities, pending further investigations.
- Results from the fauna report showed that a significant local population of Catfish (Tandanus tandanus) was identified in the surveyed area of Washpen Creek.
- The MWWG has forwarded a nomination to the NSW Fisheries Scientific Committee to list the catfish population. The occurrence of the species in the main stem of the Murray River has decreased substantially over the past 10-15 years. Only isolated populations are now found, making the recent findings significant.
- Topographic survey work has been completed for the Caringay Creek levee bank which impedes flows into / out of Lake Caringay. The development of detailed designs for the modification of the levee bank will be contracted out in the near future.

Black Swamp:
- A survey brief will soon be distributed to potential surveyors. The brief will help to identify feasible and appropriate delivery routes for environmental water into Black Swamp.

Reports:
- Final reports from the wetland watering of Nampoo Station (Repeat Watering of Wetlands #152 and 164) and Cliffhouse Station (Wetland #3938) have been completed and are available by contacting Paula D’Santos (03) 5021 9446.
- A second print-run of the Gol Gol Community Reference Group’s highly-sort after ‘History of the Gol Gol Wetlands’ are now available. Copies are available from Paula (see above for contact details).

Catfish (Tandanus tandanus) – significant population identified in Washpen Creek, Euston. (Photo: Bernard McCarthy)
“It is the culmination of the huge amount of work we have done and the support we have had over the years,” explained Howard. “The real key to it all is that we are able to work with community whether it is industry, landholders or local government, and get a collaborative result that educates people about what we are trying to do.”

Since 2000 the MWWG has managed two adaptive environmental water allocations on behalf of the NSW Government. To date nearly 75,000 megalitres of water has been delivered to more than 200 wetlands covering 71,000 hectares throughout the Murray and Lower Murray-Darling catchments.

Much of the MWWG’s work focuses on rehabilitating private wetlands which are largely overlooked, yet are of vital importance to wetland diversity and landscape management.

While about 70% of the Group’s income is spent on wetlands or on-ground rehabilitation works, it also supports smaller community and/or education projects, and scientific research. The prize winnings will be “ploughed back into wetland management, directly or indirectly” said Howard.

“With the continuation of the drought more and more wetlands are drying out. A tragic consequence of this is the increase in the number of wetlands showing signs of having sulfidic sediments.

Through the MWWG and Murray Darling Freshwater Research Centre’s (MDFRC) Inland Sulfidic Sediments (ISS) Project — funded by the Federal Government’s National Water Commission and the MWWG, aerial investigations have indicated that the issue is more widespread than originally thought.

“It is becoming a very urgent and dire situation”, explained Deb Nias, MWWG Executive Officer and the ISS Project Manager. “We have government agencies and landholders alerting us to wetlands showing signs of groundwater intrusions and potential acidification, and all asking ‘what can we do?’”

The ISS project is focussing on how impacted wetlands can be best managed. The project aims to further scientific understanding of the processes occurring but also test what is feasible at an on-ground level.

With funding assistance from the NSW Environmental Trust, information seminars aimed at inland NSW Catchment Management Authorities and other agencies have been held to raise awareness and help people identify as to whether their wetlands are impacted or not.

The project is also producing a cd-rom, with assistance from Tiana Johannis Designs, which will include a summary of the project, a Frequently Asked Questions section, outline the Decision-Support-Tool developed by the MDFRC, as well as useful links, photographs and video images of impacted wetlands.

For more information on the project please contact Deb Nias on (02) 6051 2223.
Much has been said about the importance of protecting large wetlands along the Murray River such as the iconic Barmah-Millewa Forest but what of the smaller, but no less important, wetlands in the upper reaches of the Murray?

These wetlands, above the Hume Dam are subject to reasonably natural flows only altered by water regulation from the Khancoban pondage and contribute just as much to the quality of the water in the Murray, to maintaining river health and to the biodiversity in the region.

While many of these wetlands are on private lands, some come under the management of the Hume Rural Lands Protection Board (RLPB) as they are on Travelling Stock Reserves. In recognition of their value to the environment, the MWWG has provided funding to the Hume RLPB to protect and rehabilitate two wetlands on Travelling Stock Reserves (TSRs) between Jingellic and Wellerang. The wetlands, on the floodplains of the Upper Murray River, at Karara and Appleton’s Reserves, are about 9 kms apart.

Karara is the larger of the two reserves (44.5 ha, compared to Appleton’s which is 13.5 ha). However the actual wetlands are a similar size, around 10 ha each. The Karara wetland has water in it, at different levels, 100 per cent of the year whereas Appleton’s is ephemeral and tends to dry out in drier years.

The current project funded by the MWWG builds on previous projects by the Murray Catchment Management Authority and the local Landcare group. The area around the wetland on Karara Reserve was fenced off about seven years ago and trees planted by the then Jingellic-Ournie Landcare group. Since then grazing has been excluded except for last summer when cattle were allowed to graze for a short time to get rid of the biomass build up. The regeneration on that reserve is striking with the wetland now boasting goods stands of Phragmites (common reeds) and other wetland plants.

In comparison, Appleton’s Reserve has been subject to heavy grazing pressure for many years because of the drought and historical use of the reserve and seems bare with minimal tussocks, Phragmites and other native plants. However since March this year all grazing has been excluded from Appleton’s Reserve to allow regeneration to take place. Already there are signs that the tussocks, milfoil and other wetland plants have started to come back.

"...they have got significant environmental values. … I see these reserves as our legacy for the future."

"The wetlands are fairly degraded but still significant," says senior ranger with the Hume RLPB Allan Scammell. “A lot of the natural wetlands in this area are very degraded because they are encompassed in prime grazing country. Plant studies have been done and these two still have many indigenous species.”

While Rural Lands Protection Boards are also responsible for flock and herd health issues and give assistance/advice in the control of pest animals, over the last 15 years or so Travelling Stock Reserves have been managed with a much more environmental focus. The Hume RLPB, which covers about 10,000 square kilometres including 150 TSRs, has a number of environmental enhancement projects.

“...The traditional use of these reserves, for travelling stock, is dying out,” says Allan. “A lot of these days are tendered out for grazing permits. But these reserves have got significant environmental values. Even the ones that have been heavily grazed have still got the big old trees with hollows that our birds and native animals need for breeding. And as these reserves have never been cultivated, they still have quite a lot of the native plant species that given half a chance will recover. I see these reserves as our legacy for the future.”

Neale Whitsed (left) and Allan Scammell on the bank of Appleton’s Reserve.
The funding from MWWG (about $30,000 over five years) is being used to change the management of Appleton’s Reserve, in particular where grazing is now excluded except for seasonal crash-grazing as required. It helps cover the loss of income to the Board as a result of the reserves not being grazed, and is also being used to: engage a biologist to monitor the two sites, conduct weed and pest animal control, ensure there is no unauthorised grazing of the sites, continue photographic monitoring of the changes to the sites and repair fences. (As the reserves are on the river fences are prone to flood damage.)

“The fact that we have been able to attract funding to help us with environmental management is a real bonus,” says ranger Neale Whitsed, who is based at Holbrook, and has been looking after the reserves for the past seven years. “I can now do as much [weed control etc.] as my time permits me to do. Before this funding from the MWWG there was only limited income to spend on these reserves. I always thought Appleton’s Reserve had huge potential for rehabilitation.”

Neale is very pleased he now has the opportunity to enhance the wetlands.

“Everything above the Hume Weir seems to be forgotten politically,” he says. “But if you parallel it with weed control, where they say to work from your least infested areas to your heaviest areas, to my mind rehabilitating a waterway also starts with working on your least degraded section to your most degraded. If we can do what we can on the upper reaches of the Murray that will help water quality further downstream.”

Neale says the management of the reserves is “on the cusp of change” and has been heading that way for a few years.

“That’s one of the real rewards of the job,” he says. “I believe we have an obligation to manage the public land under our control for future generations.”

Story and photographs by Margrit Beemster.
It's here! With over 4000 wetlands along the Murray River covering both NSW and Victoria, the River Murray Wetlands Database (RMWD) Atlas is a valuable new tool for river managers and those involved in wetland rehabilitation.

The RMWD Atlas, developed by the MWWG, contains maps, a summary of river reaches, aerial photographs and photographs of select individual wetlands. Based on the MWWG’s spatial database, which maps all the wetlands Commission, the Natural Heritage Trust, the former Department of Natural Resources (NSW) and the MWWG.

“The River Murray Wetlands Database is a Geographic Information System which is based on the MDBCs ‘River Murray Mapping’, explained Trish. “It is very extensive and includes the Edward-Wakool system. We are constantly up-dating the database as we find out more and/or new information.”

“The wetlands have been mapped before but this is the first time that the information about commence-to-flow levels for individual wetlands has been collated. It’s important information, giving us more knowledge about how to better manage wetlands for environmental flows. If the wetland is low on the floodplain and is inundated by summer flows, the database gives you an idea of what height to build a regulator, or if they are higher up on the floodplain it gives you an idea of what kind of flows you need in the river to actually get the water into them.”

The Atlas was launched by Ms. Wendy Craik, chief executive of the Murray-Darling Basin Commission (MDBC), at a special event held at Hume Dam on October 12th.

The Atlas is the product of a number of years of hard and detailed work conducted by MWWG project officers, in particular by Dr. Damian Green (now with the MDBC) and Ms. Trish Alexander. Information for the database was generated from landholder interviews, field assessments at a range of river flow levels, satellite image analysis and previous studies collected by Trish and Damian over the past seven years or so. The $250,000 project has been funded by the Murray Darling Basin Commission, the MDBC and the Natural Heritage Trust.

Copies of the Atlas are for sale and can be purchased from the MWWG. Information can also be provided on specific wetlands. Please contact executive officer Deb Nias on (02) 6051 2223 or deb.nias@cma.nsw.gov.au for more information.

The MWWG would like to extend a special thanks to Damian Green, Trish Alexander and Christine Reid for their efforts in producing the Atlas. Thanks also to the MDBC for financial assistance with the printing of the Atlas.
For farmer Jane Reid, the sign as to whether or not her efforts to restore a medium sized wetland on her property are successful is simple.

“I’ll know we’ll have been successful when I see the wading birds return to the mudflats in summer,” says Jane who owns “Banyandah”, a 160 ha property along the banks of the Murray River near Howlong, west of Albury, NSW.

Jane came to the river flats five years ago from a cattle property in the Upper Murray and is quick to admit she has been on a steep learning curve, particularly when it comes to understanding wetlands and the environmental consequences of altered flow regimes along the Murray.

A keen horsewoman, Jane was attracted to the property because of its suitability for riding and its natural beauty. There is a 10 ha or so ephemeral wetland which links to the Murray by a channel off a lagoon. When the water in the Murray is high, it flows into the wetland and then makes its way back to the river via another channel and anabranch.

“The trouble is, because of the regulated flows, when water is released from the Hume Dam, it is usually back to front to what would have once happened naturally,” says Jane. “Instead of the wetland having water in winter and spring, it is dry then but flooded in summer.”

Releases of water along the Murray for environmental purposes can help, but, some winters, for example, even with an environmental release Jane says there hasn’t been enough water to flush out the wetland so that its waters can reach the anabranch. The wetland is further stressed due to the drought and the low level of the Murray and it is now two years since the wetland has had water through it

Jane approached the MWWG about using her wetland as a model to explore how to re-establish the natural wetting and drying regime of the wetland. The Group has discussed plans to install a bladder into the channel that links the lagoon to the wetland so as to block the water out in summer. The next step is to get water into the wetland during winter/spring which possibly can be done by using the lagoon as a reservoir.

Jane has already made progress in achieving her vision of rehabilitating the wetland. When she first came to the property in 2002, the very dry year saw red gum seedlings takeover the wetland. On the advice of an environmental consultant the seedlings were removed. With financial assistance from the Murray Catchment Management Authority and the MWWG the wetland was fenced off from stock (about 3.5 km of fencing), and 3000 native understorey species planted around its edges.

“Despite several very dry years this planting has been very successful with wattle trees now 3 meters tall. I put the success of this planting down to timing and correct preparation prior to planting

“I’m really excited by what we hope to achieve, that is, getting the wetland back to its natural state,” says Jane. “I think the word ‘natural’ is the key. I see myself as the caretaker of this land, not its owner and it is a responsibility to look after it.”

Banyandah wetland has also been selected by the Department of Sustainability and Environment (VIC) and the Murray Darling Freshwater Research Centre as one of the sites in a three year study investigating the impact on native fish and their habitat of various flooding and inundation regimes in lagoons and wetlands along the Murray. Linked into this research is a two year $90,000 research project, funded by MWWG and conducted by Charles Sturt University, to study how frogs are affected by flooding in managed wetlands.

“I am thrilled to be able to offer my support for these research projects,” says Jane.

Story and photographs by Margrit Beemster.
Congratulations to Trish Alexander and David Mower on the arrival of Grace! The MWWG wish the new family all the best for the future.

Whist Trish is on maternity leave, we welcome Drs. Trish Bowen and Jessica MacGregor to the MWWG. Both Trish and Jess bring a wealth of knowledge and expertise on wetland and riverine systems, and we look forward to their contributions to the group.

We would also like to thank and farewell Duncan Vennell and Anna Chatfield who have since moved on from the MWWG to new jobs. The contributions which Duncan and Anna had made to the Group during their time as project officers, especially in helping with the on-ground delivery and management of Adaptive Environmental Water, was extremely valued and we wish them both all the best for the future.