A Decade Already? MWWG Celebrates

Welcome to the 4th issue of WeDs! We have a jam-packed issue for you this time round full of project updates, awards received, launches, announcements, as well as the celebrations of the Group's 10th Anniversary!

Yes that's right! Ten years have already passed since the inception of the NSW Murray Wetlands Working Group. So we thought it was a prime opportunity to get together with a number of people who have helped us along the way and celebrate the Group’s achievements and successes over the past decade.

Approximately 70 people attended the special celebratory evening, held last month in Deniliquin NSW. Joining the MWWG staff and members guests included past MWWG members and project officers, representatives of various community groups, Indigenous groups, local irrigation companies, non-government and government agencies, as well as approx. 30 landholders.

In addition to celebrating the Group’s anniversary the gathering was also aimed at bringing together all those involved with the 'Wetlands on Private Properties' project and provide an opportunity to see a special presentation on the project, discuss various aspects, share stories and help develop a local network for those landholders involved.

Ten years on - MWWG past and present staff, members and invited guests attend a special celebratory evening in Deniliquin.
MWWG’s Chairman, Howard Jones, opened the formal aspect of the evening with a brief retrospective on the Group. He outlined a number of projects that the Group has been involved with, including the restoration of Moira Lake (Barmah-Millewa Forest); installation of a regulator at Croppers Lagoon; investigation studies at Gol Gol Wetlands; development of the Thredoa Lagoon Management Plan; the soon-to-be installed Stevens Weir Fishway; the River Murray Wetland Database; the production of the Wetlands Watch Guide; the Wetland Incentive Scheme for landholders; the Wetlands on Private Properties project and the management of 32,000 ML on behalf of the NSW Government.

"The significant achievements of the MWWG over the past 10 year period were recently recognised nationally when the Group were nominated as finalists for the Thiess Services RiverPrize 2002. However, we also owe a great deal of our success to the greater community, and especially those landholders who we have worked with so closely, and whose support and enthusiasm has enabled us to achieve so much” said Howard.

Mr. David Harriss, DLWC’s Murray Regional Director and a founding member of the Group, also gave a speech. Over the years David has maintained a keen interest in the MWWG. He explained how in 1992, the then Murray and Lower Murray-Darling Catchment Management Committees recognised the continual loss and degradation of wetlands in the catchment. The Committees developed an initiative to form a community-based group that would focus on wetlands issues within the River Murray catchment - and the Working Group was established.

Trish Alexander (MWWG Project Officer, pictured above) then gave a presentation on the 'Wetlands on Private Properties' project. Results from last year's project and also some early results from this year were presented.
With the formalities over, it was time for all in attendance to enjoy the rest of the evening, mingle and share a few yarns! And judging from the conversations and the feedback since, the gathering was a great success! One attendee was even reported to have been heard singing "...cockles and mussels, alive alive o!" in the wee hours of the morning!

Thanks to all those who attended and made the evening a most enjoyable one. We thank you for your support and look forward to seeing you in another 10 years!

Message from the Chairman

"Since the last edition of WeDs the Group has been selected as finalists in the Thiess Services National RiverPrize. Judy Frankenberg (Vice-chair) and I were so very proud to receive the award on behalf of the Group, which was part of the Brisbane RiverSymposium.

"The Group has sold 25,000 ML (of the 32,000 ML it manages) this year. Due to the drought conditions there were very few projects in which we could have utilised the water efficiently and wisely. The water was sold on the Murray Irrigation Limited's (MIL) Water Exchange. The temporary trade has resulted in generating a substantial sum of funds for the Group which will be used for future projects.

"In October the Honourable Mrs. Sussan Ley kindly officiated at the launch of the 'Wetlands Watch' Guide and the announcement of the go-ahead of the Stevens Weir Fishway, of which the Group is contributing $200,000.

"The 'Wetlands on Private Properties' project within the MIL region has expanded four fold. On inspection of the sites flooded over the last two years outcomes beyond our wildest dreams are evident. The potential for this project to expand within MIL's, and other areas, is sound. On one front alone, the bird recruitment/breeding may provide outstanding results.

"Other projects are moving towards either commencement or completion.
"On the personal side, Deb Nias (MWWG project officer) and husband Richard are to begin their family in 2003. Congratulations from us all!
"As Deb will take maternity leave mid-year, Paula and Trish will continue the administration duties of the Group. With Deb only a phone call away this will ensure the good work continues.

"At our recent AGM the issue to develop a 5-year Business Plan, to provide sound process to fully utilise the funds we have generated, was agreed upon. The Business Plan will be developed over the next six months.
"I would like to thank all of the Group's members and staff for their hard work over this past year - another challenging one but also with it rewards! I look forward to 2003 being another productive year.” - 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:

River Murray Wetland Database Project:

- Previously known as the Commence-to-Flow Database project it has now been renamed to the River Murray Wetland Database.
- The MWWG has secured funding from the MDBC until April 2003.
Wetland Watering on Private Wetlands:

- The project is once again being conducted for 2002-03.
- The numbers of participating landholders has increased to 27 (last year there were 10) and the total number of wetlands receiving water this year is 43 (compared to 11 last year).
- Monitoring (plants, birds) is currently being conducted.
- An article has been submitted to the Ecological Management & Restoration Journal based on last year's results. It will be a feature article in the April 2003 edition.

Stevens Weir Fishway:

- Approval from the Commonwealth Government has been granted for the project to proceed until June 2003.
- The proposed hydro-electric scheme has been cancelled.

Thegoa Lagoon:

- The lagoon is now completely dry.
- The fourth vegetation monitoring stage was completed in November - indicating that the majority of plants colonising the lagoon bed are native species.
- Monthly groundwater monitoring is showing a gradual decrease in the groundwater levels since the lagoon has dried.
- A meeting is scheduled in January 2003 for interested parties to review and begin the implementation of the Thegoa Lagoon Management Plan.

Bottle Bend Billabong:

- The baseline aquatic fauna survey has been completed.
- Surface water sampling revealed that the billabong had become highly acidic (pH <3) and illustrates some interesting sediment chemical processes and reactions occurring.
- The final report will be available in January 2003.

Purda Billabong:

- Located within Moorna Station, Wentworth.
- Baseline surveys on the flora (terrestrial and aquatic) and aquatic fauna have been completed. Reports are due in March 2003.

Thiess Services National RiverPrize 2002 Finalists

The NSW Murray Wetlands Working Group Inc. were proud to be nominated as one of just four national finalists for the prestigious Thiess Services National RiverPrize 2002. This national award recognises excellent work by community groups in the management and restoration of rivers and waterways. The RiverPrize also provides a healthy $25,000 to the winner, who this year was the Merri Creek Management Committee in Victoria.
Project Officer for the MWWG, Deborah Nias said, "We are honoured to have been shortlisted for this award. It is testimony to all the hard work that current and previous project officers have done, as well as recognising the hard work and dedication of the voluntary members of the Working Group."

"This is an excellent way to cap off our 10th year anniversary celebrations! It confirms that the Group’s strategy of combining well-researched, technically feasible projects with community participation is the right way to go. We were also proud to receive in 1995, the Silver Award by RiverCare 2000 for the Moira Lake Wetland Rehabilitation Project."

The RiverPrize award ceremony was held during the 2002 RiverSymposium in Brisbane. The award luncheon was attended by several hundred guests, including local dignitaries, Indigenous representatives, Thiess Services, scientists, managers and community members. The MWWG’s Chairman Howard Jones, and Vice-Chair Judy Frankenberg attended the ceremony on behalf of the Group, and received a handsome trophy appropriately depicting a coolamon.

As part of the RiverSymposium, Deborah gave a 20 minute presentation on the Group’s activities over the past 10 years. The recent management of 32,000 megalitres of water by the Group was of particular interest to the audience, as it was recognised as an innovative approach to wetland management. Deborah also show-cased the ‘Watering of Wetlands on Private Properties Project’, which generated a lot of interest, particularly amongst landholders.

"We felt enormously proud to be finalists amongst such tough competition, even though we didn’t win the big prize. Being finalists has also given an extra boost of enthusiasm to us all, and we look forward to trying for the big catch next year" said Deborah.

Non-MWWG Project Updates

Darling Anabranch Management Plan (DAMP):

- After 4 years the ‘Darling Anabranch Management Plan - a proposal for the future of the Darling Anabranch” was released in November 2002.
- The proposal details of the plan are to be refined for negotiations with government.
- National Action Plan (NAP) funding has been secured to commence implementation of the proposal.
- A negotiation committee has been formed to secure the best possible deal for Anabranch landholders.

Menindee Lakes Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) Project:

- The project was completed in October 2002.
- All the project’s reports have been collated. These are available either digitally on cd, or as a boxed set of hard copies (available from local and State libraries).
- The next stage of the Menindee Lakes Review is expected to commence some time 2003.

Ramsar Listing of the Central Murray Forests:

- Delays have been experienced preventing the Ramsar listing of the Millewa, Koondrook, and Werai State Forests in the Central Murray region of southern NSW.
- It is expected that the listing process will be finalised by World Wetlands Day (02/02/03).
- Draft versions of Ramsar Information sheets and Maps for the nominated forests are currently in preparation.
43 Private Property Wetlands get a Drink.

After the overwhelming support, success and very positive biological findings from last year the 'Wetlands on Private Properties' project is happening once again - only it's bigger and better!

This year the project has increased in size with 27 landholders participating in the project compared to the 10 landholders from last year. In total 43 wetland sites (total of 572 ha) this year have received water which is aimed at restoring and improving the biodiversity values of the wetlands.

MWWG project officers Trish Alexander and Emily Maher have been monitoring the response in vegetation and bird-life in nine of the wetlands which range from Black Box depressions, open lignum stands, floodrunners and old stream beds.

"Interest in the project has been fantastic despite the dry conditions this year", explained Trish. "All the landholders who are involved are very pleased with the early results and the operational processes of the project. With assistance from Murray Irrigation Limited's (MIL) staff we have managed to streamline the processes such as developing information brochures and advertising the project earlier. This in particular has helped us to be able to deliver the water earlier this year ie. in late spring rather than heading into the summer months."

"A lot of thought was put into whether we should go ahead with the project due to the drought conditions. However, even if we did have a much wetter year these wetlands would not have received the amount of water they used to, except for a little rainfall, due to farm infrastructure and them now being isolated from the river and creeks. So we decided to go ahead with the project and have had tremendous support from the landholders and the general community" said Trish.

The project was initiated last year after the MWWG recognised that within MIL's Area of Operation there were a number of wetlands on private properties that have become isolated from flood events and rainfall runoff, due to the construction of infrastructure, the development of crop areas, diversion of water etc. As a consequence, these wetlands have remained dry for many years - some for as long as 40. Landholders were concerned about the gradual decline in the health of the Black Box trees and the number of weeds that inhabit these areas.

Through the assistance of MIL and the use of their irrigation infrastructure, the MWWG have been delivering water to these wetlands since October 2002. The water used is part of the water allocation that the Group manages on behalf of the NSW Government for environmental purposes. This

One of the properties that has been watered in this year's 'Wetlands on Private Properties' project.

Some wetland plants are also beginning to emerge such as: Nardoo (Marsilea sp.) above, Water Ribbons (Triglochin sp) and Spikerushes (Eleocharis sp).
year a total of 3,975 ML has been delivered to the 43 sites.

Early results from the monitoring have already indicated an improved health in the Black Box trees and lignum bushes both displaying new growth and flowering.

The bird response has also been encouraging with Red-knee Dotterels, Egrets, Herons, Spoonbills, Grebes and 1000’s of ducks having been sighted. Even some of the less frequently seen birds are taking an interest in the wetlands, with one property having sighted up to 20 Marsh Sandpipers and Latham’s Snipe (both migratory species from the Northern Hemisphere) and another property reporting approx. 10 Brolgas! Due to the extraordinarily dry conditions, it is expected that the numbers of birds (particularly waterbirds) attracted to the wetlands will be much higher compared to last year.

The monitoring of the plants and birds, as well as taking photographs, will continue throughout the summer.

**Stevens Weir to get a Fishway.**
The Stevens Weir Fishway Project has had a rocky start due to delays associated with the potential development of a hydro-electric scheme on the site. However, the Commonwealth Government has agreed to allow this project to proceed until June 2003, and the MWWG has provided additional funding to ensure its completion.

Stevens Weir, situated on the Edward River near Deniliquin NSW, is regarded as the top priority for fish passage within the Murray-Darling Basin outside of the Murray River itself. The site has been a key bottleneck for many important species such as Trout Cod, Murray Cod, Golden and Silver Perch.

These fish become trapped by the weir as they try to migrate upstream to their traditional breeding sites, and this has resulted in a concentrated fishing effort by both humans and birds!

Member for Farrer, Mrs. Sussan Ley, officially announced the beginning of the first stage of the project whilst visiting the site in October. The first stage will see the completion of a design and specifications for review by key agencies. NSW Fisheries are overseeing the project, with assistance from the Murray-Darling Basin Commission and the MWWG.

Locally, Stevens Weir is a popular picnic and fishing spot. The new fishway is expected to allow fish access to the area as well as enabling them to migrate between the Edward-Wakool Anabranch and the Barmah-Millewa Forests area for breeding, which previously they have been unable to do.

It is anticipated that the fishway will be a vertical slot design, similar to the fishway at Torrumbarry Weir.

The fishway is scheduled to be constructed by June/July 2003 and to cost approximately $300,000. It is jointly funded by NHT and the MWWG through the trade of water savings.

MWWG Bi-Annual Meeting and AGM.

In late November the MWWG held its Bi-annual meeting and Annual General Meeting in Deniliquin, NSW.

In addition to discussions on the current projects and future directions for the Group, the meeting also included two presentations. David Leslie, MWWG member and Regional Ecologist for State Forests, NSW, provided an overview on the listing process for the Millewa, Koondrook and Werai State Forests under the Ramsar Convention for Wetlands.


Mike Thomson (Regional Director of State Forests, NSW) provided an update on the Moira Lake Stage 3 project. The future is looking promising for the development of the project. The MWWG agreeing to increase its current involvement levels with the project.

After the Bi-annual meeting the Group's 2002 Annual General Meeting was held. All those with office bearing positions stepped down and nominations were called. Howard Jones continues as Chairman for the Group, Judy Frankenberg is Vice-Chairperson, Paula D’Santos is Secretary, Deborah Nias is Treasurer and Adrian Wells, Ian Davidson and David Leslie are Executive Committee members.

The day after the meetings the Group and some guests visited four private properties that are taking part (or participated last year) in the 'Wetlands on Private Properties’ project. The water in all wetlands had been there for at least 3 weeks - and the response in the presence of waterbirds and emerging wetland vegetation, or new growth on trees was already evident. The fieldtrip also provided a great opportunity for the Group’s members and guests to be able to speak to some of the landholders.

Despite the rapidly changing and extreme weather conditions at times, and the threat of rogue ostriches in two of the wetlands, the fieldtrip was an excellent way to cap off two very busy and information-packed days.
MWWG members inspect two properties connected to the 'Wetlands on Private Properties' project. Top: Susan Bull from 'Union Plains' discusses the results after their wetland was watered last year. Below: members pile onto the ute at "Warbreccan" owned by Fionn and Rob Lindsay-Field.

'Wetlands Watch' - get your copy now!
The MWWG are proud to announce that the 'Wetlands Watch' Guide is now available.

Although the Guide focuses on wetland management in the southern part of the Murray-Darling Basin, it is particularly relevant to wetlands in the Murray and Lower Darling River systems.

Mrs Sussan Ley (member for Farrer) and Howard
The Guide was officially launched in October at Stevens Weir, Deniliquin, by Member for Farrer, Mrs. Sussan Ley.

Trish Alexander, the MWWG project officer who has put the Guide together, said "So far we have received some very positive feedback about the Guide. Copies have been distributed to landholders, natural resource managers, scientists, schools and libraries - and the message we keep hearing is that it's really user-friendly and full of practical and easy to understand information, which is exactly what we were aiming to achieve."

If you would like to obtain your own copy of the Guide please contact Trish Alexander on (02) 6043 0124.

River Murray Wetland Database

Further development of the River Murray Wetland Database (formerly known as the Commence-to-Flow Database) is now being funded by the Murray-Darling Basin Commission (MDBC) until April 2003.

The database is a Geographic Information System (GIS) that contains environmental information on over 4000 River Murray wetlands, such as the impacts of river regulation, vegetation communities and river level when they begin to receive water. This information will be important in building our knowledge of the environmental flow requirements for the river system.

"One of the major aims for this year is to improve our knowledge of wetlands between Euston and the South Australian border. To ensure that both sides of the river are included we are working closely with several projects managed by the Victorian Mallee Catchment Management Authority. The wetlands in this area are quite diverse and include the Hattah Lakes, the Euston Lakes, and the floodplain systems associated with the Wallpolla River, Lindsay River and Frenchmans Creek" explained Damian Green, MWWG's Project Officer who is developing the database.

"In this section of the river system, a large percentage of wetlands and creeks are now permanently inundated by weir pools, and therefore do not receive seasonally variable water levels, which is important in providing variable habitats able to maintain the natural diversity of aquatic flora and fauna".

Continuously high river levels, due to weir pools, may also be contributing to large scale salinisation of the floodplain. Prior to regulation, the River Murray was a major outlet for the region's groundwater. However, the permanent unnaturally high river levels now prevent the groundwater from entering the river system. Although this may help to maintain low river salinity levels essential for irrigation, it has caused the groundwater in many areas to rise to the surface of the adjacent floodplain carrying with it dissolved salts. This is threatening the survival of floodplain and wetland vegetation and also the productivity of some farming systems. To overcome these problems seasonal weir pool drawdowns and salt interception schemes are now being considered.

Information from the database will be available to government agencies and community groups by May 2003, however for current projects limited information can be obtained by contacting Deborah Nias on (02) 6043 0140.

MWWG ASL Student Prize - 2002

At the recent 41st Congress of the Australian Society for Limnology (ASL), held at Margaret River WA, this year’s NSW Murray Wetlands Working Group Student Prize was awarded to Stephen Beatty of Murdoch University.
The Prize, valued at $100, was awarded to Stephen for his poster presentation (co-author Dr Brett Molony from the Dept of Fisheries W.A.) entitled "Mitigation of negative impacts on fish and freshwater crayfish during remedial works at Waroona Dam".

Waroona Dam covers approximately 144 ha when full, and is the first major public access dam south of Perth, located 112km from metropolitan area. It is an important area for the recreational marron (Cherax cainii) fishery and also supports populations of another native crayfish Cherax quinquecarinatus commonly known as gilgies, and native fish species such as western pygmy perch (Edelia vittata) and western minnow (Galaxias occidentalis). The dam is also stocked with recreational fish such as the introduced rainbow trout (Oncorhynchus mykiss).

Commencing in October 2002 Waroona Dam will be drained for 9 months, to enable maintenance works on the dam wall. The project is a collaboration between Water Corporation of W.A. (the authority that manages the dam), Murdoch University and the Dept. of Fisheries W.A. It has also involved many volunteers from the local community, Dept of Fisheries marron logbook holders, Water Corporation staff and Murdoch University students.

The mitigation project is designed to focus on the impact of the draining of the dam on the two recreational fisheries, as well as the impact on other native fish and crayfish species. It aims to mitigate the negative effects of the draining through captive breeding, eliminating exotic redfin (but not rainbow trout) and constructing artificial habitats to enhance crayfish and native fish populations once the dam is refilled.

The MWWG Student Prize is awarded to a student (Honours/Masters/PhD) for the presentation of either a talk or poster that has direct relevance to wetland management, preferably with community involvement. It is aimed at recognising the valuable contribution that such research studies can make to natural resource management and to provide encouragement for students to continue their excellent work.

Now almost halfway through his PhD Stephen explains, “This project represents a response and management action to dam drainage that has not been attempted before in Australia on a dam of such considerable size. The results of this project can be used as a basis for mitigation of negative impacts of biodiversity values in dam works planned by Water Corporation and other water management agencies in other States.”

Congratulations Stephen!

Wetland Extreme Sports

Stephen Beatty - this year’s MWWG ASL Student Prize winner pictured here releasing captured marron into the ALCOA Yarloop marron farm for captive breeding.
Feel like wetland monitoring is dull and dirty work? Well why not try adding an element of 'extreme sports' to your next fieldtrip?

Yes that's right folks all you need is one adult-sized Ostrich, preferably one that is feeling a little frisky (if you know what I mean), approx. 7ft tall and weighing in at an average 100 kg! Then all you need to do is don a pair of rubber waders (preferably one size too big), stand in the middle of a lignum swamp in knee-deep water, complete with field equipment hanging around your neck. As the Ostrich is in breeding mode it will be highly territorial and will want to chase everything in sight. It's like the running of the bulls in Pamplona, only its with an ostrich and in a wetland - but otherwise it's exactly like it!

Warning! This extreme sport is not recommended for young children, people who suffer from heart complaints or any one who is sane.

This year’s Vin Byrnes’ Award (which goes to someone/thing that make the MWWG meeting memorable) goes to the Ostrich at Vagg’s property which chased one of the MWWG project officers during a recent field trip. All we can say is “wetland runner ... that ostrich is after you!”