

A CLEAN WATER COALITION ?

The idea of a coalition of community groups focussing on the central theme of "clean water for every body" has been splashing around the environment movement in N.S.W. for some time.

HOW TO LAUNCH THE IDEA

Rather than let discussion slop about, dribble on endlessly or slowly evaporate, its been suggested that we should float the idea and see if it sinks or swims (or dies of poisoning!).

This rather wet discussion paper aims to flush out support for this idea from as broad a range of interest groups as possible. It's hoped that many people and groups will consider how their activities can contribute to a stream of consciousness which demands clean water.

WHY A COALITION ?

To date much of the campaigning on water quality issues has been addressed to individual catchments, which is okay, except that declining standards of water quality and quantity are a state wide - even nation wide - problem.

Fragmentation of campaigning allows the drips in government agencies to treat each particular issue seperately - usually trying to hose down each problem through denial, followed by disinformation and cautious action (if any) producing ineffective results.

What's at the bottom of the murky waters of our many public water administrations, is a willingness to allow pollution and a cowardice to pursue the highest water quality as a top priority issue - no matter who is to blame for the pollution.

This cowardly acquiescence to the polluters is based on the wrongheaded belief that the public will swallow lousy water. A strong campaign, linking a wide variety of interest groups will sweep away this view.

If people all across N.S.W. and the nation get steamed up, & flood politicians and bureaucrats with demands for clean water, the pressure will become enormous.

HOW WOULD IT WORK ?

The purpose of a state (or nation) wide coalition would not be drain support and resources from existing local, regional or state group but to act as an umbrella under which these groups could continue their local, regional or state based campaigns.

No veto or ownership of the right to campaign for clean water is envisaged, rather a coalition of interests would facilitate the flow of information and the pooling of experience.



Basically, if you were working on, say, water quality in the Hawkesbury / Nepean system, you could use a common slogan such as "clean water for every body", which would get your point across, but would link up with coastal outfall protestors and inland rivers action groups.

A common logo might be a good campaign interconnector, while the exchange of information on local water issues would help understand the depth of problem, and dissolve our isolation.

A shared mailing list and /or newsletter could be in the pipeline...

WHO WOULD PARTICIPATE ?

Coastal ocean outfall campaigners, urban water quality activists, inland rivers protection groups, fishing organisations, tourist operators, boating groups, animal rights campaigners, medical practitioners, parents, children ... all sorts of people have a potential to join the rising tide of opposition to polluted waters.

CLEAN WATER WHOSE RIGHT

Currently, the NSW Government is rewriting its legislation, the Water Act 1912 and its various water policies. Meanwhile, the Commonwealth, QLD, NSW, VIC & SA are endeavouring to grasp the full breadth of the issues affecting the Murray Darling River system.

Both these focii illustrate the need for community action for clean water to be broader than simply local groups.

Perhaps a Clean Water Coalition could reflect a broader spectrum of concerns.

WHERE TO FROM HERE ?

This discussion paper invites a wave of reaction. If there is a ripple of excitement in your group at the idea of tapping into a Clean Water Coalition please comment. You may want to filter out some of the above ideas, funnel in large sums of money, or wash it up altogether!

Send your responses to John Corkill, c/- NSW Environment Centre, 39 George St, The Rocks. 2000 or fax 02 2475 945.

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No easy cure as a river slowly dies

By PETER BOWERS

WHEN Bourke Shire Council found itself with a crisis no-one knew how to handle — an unheard-of outbreak of toxic blue-green algae in the Darling River — the increasingly frantic phone calls from the shire's health officer, Terry Pearce, to bureaucrats in Sydney and elsewhere produced one clarion response.

The NSW Pollution Control Commission warned Mr Pearce that if he went ahead with plans to spray the river with an algicide, the commission would prosecute Bourke Shire and him personally for polluting the river.

The Bourke Shire President, Wally Mitchell, who lives in Louth, a river village 100 road-kilometres downstream from Bourke, is not called the "Mouth from Louth" for nothing. Nor is he easily put off.

Applying the reverse-run-around response (when one bureaucrat knocks you back, just knock on another bureaucrat's door) the shire president bypassed an unhelpful Pollution Control Commission and sought from the Agriculture Department in Orange what he describes as "verbal permission to carry out an experimental spraying exercise".

"We used it [the algicide] with limited permission, the sort that evaporates when the heat comes on," Mr Mitchell observes philosophically.

The Agriculture Department tells a different story. "We were waiting for Wally to get back to us to obtain official permission. He never did," a spokesman for the department told the *Herald*. Mr Mitchell, who knows how to fly by the seat of his pants, was busy organising a crop duster and a pilot, both of which were supplied without charge by a big cotton grower.

Authorised or not, the unshy shire president is adamant that the spot-spraying of 10 kilometres of river over a 40-kilometre stretch, upriver from Louth, got rid of the algae, and the water in that part of the river is now safe for drinking by humans and stock.

The Department of Water Resources says that, not having tested the quality of the water before or after the spraying, it is unable to comment on its efficacy. However, Water Resources sees no point in further spraying,



DEATH OF THE DARLING

particularly as the algae has exploded over 1,400 kilometres of the river system in NSW and south-west Queensland.

The problem, according to Water Resources, requires long-term measures to stop nutrients, such as phosphorus, which feed the algae, getting into the Darling. To meet the immediate emergency, charcoal filters should be used to remove the toxins from river water or supplies should be brought in by road tanker.

But, Water Resources declares, if the Darling is not to die 100 deaths between the occasional

“A large population is being exposed to an extremely potent toxin. The long-term effect is unknown.”

flushing-out flood, the State Government will have to provide the funds to remove all the nutrient from the sewage dumped by river towns into the Darling, not to mention the need for buffer corridors to stop the fertiliser nutrient run-off from irrigators, including cotton growers.

For that the State Government will have to provide a lot more money than it now allows for maintaining the quality of our rivers, beyond the immediate Sydney region.

The department's budget for 27 river basins is a pittance compared with funds available to the Water Board, responsible for only four river systems in the Sydney region.

The manufacturer of the algicide Coptrol, Mr Brett Ruth, of

Ruth Consolidated Industries, meets criticism of the spraying of the Darling on November 10 head-on, asserting: "It is not Bourke Shire or Ruth Industries that put at risk the health of the people who live on the Darling by spraying the river with Coptrol, which is a specific algicide and approved for water used for drinking."

"By failing to undertake limited, strategic spraying of the Darling to keep water supplying river towns free of algae, it is the authorities that are putting public health at risk. For the first time in Australia's history a large population is being exposed to the effects of an extremely potent toxin. The long-term effect on public health is unknown."

Like most great rivers, the Darling's catchment is vast, sprawling 500,000 square kilometres over outback NSW and Queensland. The Darling begins everywhere and nowhere.

Much the same can be said about the administration of the river. No fewer than six departments and government agencies dip a paddle in the Darling: Water Resources, Fisheries, Pollution Control, Agriculture, Public Works, Murray-Darling Basin Commission.

Then there's the long, twisting string of shire councils along the Darling and its tributaries.

This week the algae crisis got the six principals, plus Sydney Water Board, Hunter Water Board and two professorial experts on blue-green algae, into one room to set up a task force to find a long-term solution to the problem. The committee has four months to produce an interim report.

Water Resources' chief scientist, Ian Smalls, told the meeting the Darling had suffered what amounted to a massive heart attack.

For years, he said, the river had been overfed nutrients and nothing less than a complete change of lifestyle was required if it was to recover.

Picking up the heart attack analogy, John Verhoeven, Water Resources' environmental branch manager, who will head the task force, sees no quick fix for the Darling: "There's no triple bypass, no miracle cure, just a long haul back."



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12 WANAKA PLACE
GLENORIE 2157
10TH JANUARY 1992

Dear John,

After our brief conversation today regarding the need for a clean water coalition, might I suggest that, as we both well recognise, the pivotal place that water and catchments, under the umbrella of some sort of sustainable catchment management, will take next century for all of us, demands that we must urgently start to organise much of our environmental energy in these directions.

I would be delighted to participate in some sort of framework along these lines, as I believe that, for land-based conservation, (as well as much coastal marine conservation), organisation of much of the environmental movement along these lines will do a great deal to provide a unity of action where, today, so much of our energies seem so disparate.

What I am saying I guess is this, whether our goals be wildlife conservation, endangered species, forest management, revegetation, land degradation, water quality, or even urban air pollution, it will only be through the recognition that the only truly rational, and ecologically defensible boundaries we should recognise, are those of our catchments and the (overlapping) territories of the species that inhabit them.

I sense that, like other rather basal instincts such as hunger, thirst, sexual reproduction, shelter and warmth, there is also a desire for most of the world's citizens to have access to clean water. Even middle Australia is getting on the bandwagon, buying water purifiers at a great rate. In the U.S. and Europe, water is becoming a unifying focus not only for the greens but also for the average citizen. I believe that water focussed campaigns will have a lot to do with expanding the reach of the ecology movement into the homes of the broader population. There is a growing fear that soon there will be no safe water to drink, (if that situation has not already developed for most of humankind !!)

Go ahead, see if you are able to sound out a coalition. Perhaps we could at last get some sort of forum that would genuinely see the NCC, TEC, ACF and other groups united on a very broad, and popular cause. I would love to see such a forum become a national one.

Regards, keep me informed,

David Hughes.

AN AFTER THOUGHT -

I guess the other side of the coin is that, when we start to focus on catchments through water, we start to pull on side a broad range of other interested parties.

Downstream we find farmers, the fishing industry & others who are now being forced to "join" us. I'm sure that the power of water & catchments is far more in the political arena than most conservationists have ever dreamed.

Just look at the Darling,
the Hawkesbury etc.

Diana H

