



## Watermarks Conference: 2011

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This conference has been splendid, and it is a pleasure to have the opportunity to weave together some threads of ideas, issues and possibilities out of the many diverse strands of this intense conference.

At Watermarks we have experienced a flowing of ideas. There has been the rich nourishment of being together – meeting, talking, learning – which is all part of the special tradition of these national conferences and one that I hope will continue.

Water country and water land – throughout this conference we have acknowledged traditional owners and I think that everyone has appreciated their generosity in sharing knowledge that has deep and spiritual connections. This enriches us all.

### Where we have travelled



We were truly welcomed by Colin Hunter Jnr who gave us the gift of leaves – for a safe journey in Wurundjeri country. And we have been safe – warmly held by this conference and its instant community.

The Watermarks conference has been a journey of discovery: many themes, many places and many stories. We have crossed Australia – the Kimberley, the coasts, the inland, the cities – as we heard about water – water country, water places, about too much water and too little.

Water plays so many roles. It is essential for life. It is vital for food production; as a means of transport – we heard about canals, canoes, and walking along waterways; in industry; for its beauty in our lakes, waterfalls, fountains; for ceremony; for fun at the local pool; as a source of energy. Importantly water is a symbol of power and control, and its ownership and management is a significant political issues in Australia today.

The conference demonstrated all these and more aspects of water, through many wonderful presentations – well-crafted, interesting, reflective - revealing a depth of knowledge and a desire for continuing research and richer understandings.

### Setting the scene



Joe Ross (NAILSMA) started us off with big questions and ideas. He highlighted the need to talk about what is important in the social fabric of our country – not just GDP! He emphasised that that land, water and people are not separate and he called for integration to replace the current compartmentalisation .

Joe put the cultural values of water right in centre stage and introduced the idea of 'cultural flows', along with advocating greater recognition of Indigenous knowledge and its relevance today.

George Cooley from 1<sup>st</sup> Peoples Water Engagement Council spoke about cultural protocols around water. Powerfully he reminded us that water is like air – it should be free.

And while much of the conference was focused on settler peoples and their approaches to this land – the Indigenous peoples' respect for water seemed to resonate throughout the conference, creating powerfully contrasting values and perspectives.

### Keeping and transforming



Reconstruction and transformation of historic water places emerged in papers on ports, docks, piers – what does conserving these places mean? Saving it for what – for ongoing use? And saving it how?

Peter Lovell's term 'fugitive fabric' crystallised the challenges of wood as a material. On a similar vein, others spoke of water and sewerage infrastructure – and the challenges they face in achieving the right mix of conservation and ongoing use.

So what will we choose to commemorate? What will we leave 'empty' like the bluestone lined basins at Preston Reservoir? How will we tell these complex water stories – from the so common narratives of pioneer settlers – left dry and desolate by "Reclamation" promises, by the 'falseness' of a single season, by the empty irrigation channels.

Stores of bountiful water have been proven false – and now there is climate change to consider.

Words, phrases and images in many papers will stay with me: 'Broken Bucket Tank', 'Humbug Sluicing Company' and images too: Owen River arrives in San Fernando valley; empty water carts lined up; Indigenous observers of the new dam – in awe or horror?

Thinking further about places and tangible water heritage – so much is about flow, movement, change – how can we convey this in a place-based conservation approach?

### Understandings



A significant theme throughout was how we come to understandings of the past, and papers presented covered archives, GIS, e-systems, contact rock art and more. The question of how we use this knowledge to look forward and to plan was a key focus.

The importance of drawing together the different knowledges came through many times: this was more than just the drawing together of different disciplines (which is important of course) but rather drawing on the many different ways of knowing. This means no more discounting of Indigenous knowledge.

### Spirit

The spiritual meanings of water places came through many presentations about Indigenous connections to water and country.

The Creation stories from Budj Bim to Cape York. The importance of cultural protocols in caring for water.

And passionate connections were revealed in community campaigns to keep swimming pools – those great local places where we've all hung out. Important community places – and often community created and cared for.

Using multiple ways to record people's connections to water – to place, story, knowledge – and new technologies are creating wonderful opportunities to document layers of meanings.

## Water as problem



'Water as problem' is a major Australian historical theme – from colonial perspectives anyway!

Water is never where we want it to be! Or perhaps, we always want too much. We are users and changers, not carers. Helen Doyle's phrase 'each wave of settlers prayed for rain and engineers' crystallised so much. Nature can't be trusted whereas engineers can deliver!

Many presentations described water engineering projects: grand, often ingenious, sometimes successful. We heard about projects designed to move water vast distances, often at great and ongoing cost. Engineering solutions designed to overcome natural limits – to defeat nature – for a time anyway.

Selfishness and greed were significant themes too: those who seek to benefit from water - to sell it and to keep others away. We heard about miners and squatters and pastoralists. We heard who lost out – Aboriginal people, urban poor, yeoman farmers. And we heard about the clash of private benefits and public good.

Gray Brechin's demonstration that the 'most lucrative crop in a dry landscape is a city' was a show stopper. The scale of the appropriation of land and water, the bullying and the self-interest left us all open-mouthed. What a contrast Helen Doyle offered with the structured public process that shaped water supply in Victoria.

We heard too about the desire to have a 'water view' all one's own, no matter what the impact on public assets like our public river frontage.

As great users and abusers of water – what will create change? Water wars are a bleak prediction in a climate change future - so how do we want our future to be?

## Conference chat



What's been the talk around the water cooler? Here are some of the things I heard:

- that water is at the heart of human endeavours – it determines where we live and how we live
- that water is often overlooked – how strange given it is so vital
- that water is in everything – that this theme has connected so many places and ideas
- that water places and stories are remarkably diverse
- that water policy should be part of our interests as heritage people

- that water is cultural
- that water is both everyday and very special.



What will we take with us from this conference?

Where to now, as we go out from the conference and back to our usual places and our work. What will we take with us?

Let's take:

**Cultural flows** – it's a concept we all need to explore and understand better and it is one of the gifts of this conference. It links us to the need to engage in public policy around water.

**Public policy** – past, present and future was touched on by most presenters in some way so the role of public policy is a worthy focus for more attention.

**Vital for life** - let's see water again for what it is – vital to life

**Intangible** - let's be more intangible

**Dialogue** - let's open up dialogue about culture and water across the many domains in which we are each active.

What part could we play in a National Water Summit, referred to by George Cooley, and how can we support real community engagement? And how can we engage in this important national conversation?

Let's all recognise and respect the many **knowledges** that can contribute to new and better integrated understandings of water, and give real value to Indigenous peoples' knowledge and perspectives.

Last, but never least, let us collaborate together on this vital topic into the future.

And so how will we rate this conference – 10 out of 10 I think. It has been a remarkable experience.

Thank you.