The Life and Times of the Coorong

Speech Notes by Henry Jones

Coorong Mullet Barbacue Dinner

Saturday 30th April 2011

Henley & Grange Community Centre, Henley Beach

These are my personal views, not the views of any committee on which I sit.

I believe that when I started fishing fifty years ago I was truly fortunate to see a near pristine Lakes and Coorong.

Being the first permanent resident in Clayton, and having plucked my high school sweet heart from her high heeled, smartly dressed secretarial job, marrying her and putting her in rubber boots and overalls, we have both been fighting to retain the health of our beloved lakes and Coorong.

The completion of the barrages some 20-30 years earlier and the every increasing demand on the river had not yet affected the environment to a great extent.

Sure the barrages slashed the area of estuary by some 90% but the fact that every year people were being encouraged to develop more property, pump more water meant that a smaller estuary was being satisfied by the lesser amount of water.

When I started work in the early sixties we were experiencing cycles of frequent wet periods and it seemed normal for large amounts of water to run to sea every year.

Clayton with its surrounding lakes and wetlands was a true wilderness.

Fishing in those days with regular environmental flows and good quality water were exceptional, Cod, Callop, Silver Perch, Catfish were plentiful in the Lakes and Mulloway, Coorong Mullet, Flounder, Sea Bream in the Coorong.

Pushing of from shore was an absolute joy, as a blanket of birds would rise before your boat wherever you went.

Two fishermen from Goolwa were my only competition Dick Woodrow and Hector Samaskas but there was plenty of space and plenty of fish.

The picture of their two large white boats with dinghies trailing, fishermen gutting their catch and feeding seagulls still remain razor sharp in my mind.

It was better than Kakadu,

It was better than the Everglades; in fact it was better than anywhere.

Sturt wrote of his travels “Immediately below me was a beautiful lake which appeared to be a fitting reservoir for a noble stream”.

We used to spot Mulloway by climbing up the mast and looking for large schools of fish.

The dark blue blob with the occasional silver flash is a dead give away.

A haul net was then quietly run around them using oars wrapped in towelling so as not to squeak.

If you used a motor it would spook them and you would finish up with nothing. Hand signs instead of talking, smooth actions, no panic.

You put pressure on the head line and slowly start the haul, making sure the lead line is on the bottom otherwise the bream will turn on their side and swim away, then you wait for the tell tale corks. If they stay on the surface it is not good news, but if they submerge you can bet it’s full of fish, Mulloway, Bream, Flounder and Coorong Mullet.

Those large schools never come into the Coorong now because the abundance of food and the mixing of waters are not there to attract them and why would they scrape their bellies in the shallow Murray Mouth.

Sure there have been changes to our industry.

Our flat bottom wooden dories that trailed behind the larger wooden sail vessel with a slow inboard motor have changed to low maintenance aluminium with self draining decks and large outboards.

Our outboard motors from 4hp, 2 stroke Anzani, Caille or Seagulls to over 60 hp modern 4 stroke friendly to the environment motors.

Our nets from fast rotting cotton to long life nylon and floats made from brittle cork to tuff polystyrene foam.

Our refrigeration from ice kept in wooden boxes with sawdust for insulation to modern self-controlled cool rooms or freezers.

But the main changes are that the Lakes and Coorong fishery is the most environmentally awarded fishery in Australia.

Every part of our fishery is controlled by either input or output control.

We developed the world's first Environmental Management Plan for a whole of fishery that is being copied all over Australia and most recently we received Marine Stewardship which is a third party audit of sustainable fishing practices and another world first for a multi species fishery.

You may ask "what is the Coorong estuary?'

Well, seawater is about 35 parts per thousand salt.

The estuary forms when an environmental flow, usually in August-September or October, fresh winter rains mix with the saltwater and dilute it to between 15-25 parts per thousand.

Then the pituitary gland notifies the brain of the fish that it is time to rock and roll. It is time to swell the gonads.

The area changes from no activity to one of a bustling, busy area that only has its mind on reproduction.

Not only the fish, but also the birds, the plants, the invertebrates, the macro-invertebrates, in fact every living thing.

Every one has experienced the terrestrial wonders after rain but few have experienced the joy that happens below the surface when the river runs in spring.

They are astonishing glorious experiences that can only make you marvel, effecting both fresh and salt water equally.

Mother Nature timed this spring environmental flow to coincide with high spring tides and strong south-westerly winds that enabled fresh water to be pushed well up the Coorong.

This mixing of the waters is the magical trigger that makes our unique system work in the only estuary in all the Murray-Darling Basin.

It was a paradise that I was privileged to witness and it remained that way until April 1981 when the Murray Mouth closed for the first time in many thousands of years.

Since that dreaded date that is wedged in my mind our Lakes and Coorong have been dying at an alarming rate until we can see species after species now extinct from our area.

Local species that you take for granted. Many varieties of water snail, fish, cod, silver perch, catfish and many small bodied fish, leeches, yabbies, shrimps, aquatic plants, small birds, large birds, white fronted chats, sea eagles, blue billed musk duck, musk ducks.

All now threatened by white man.

I really miss the very loud splash of the alpha musk duck, usually just before dawn as he determines the pecking order and calls to his females.

Some of these unique species are extinct locally but could be extinct forever and we do not have the right to do that.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Coorong and Lower Lakes are listed as Wetlands of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention Treaty that we signed in 1986 and so obligates our government to protect and manage the area wisely.

The region is also subject to a migratory bird agreement with China and Japan because of the 33 migratory species that frequent the area.

That telling time of April of 1981 should have warned us, it should have given us the message that something was wrong.

If the Mouth of our greatest river system that drains four states closed for the first time in 7,000 years then maybe we are taking out too much water.

Unfortunately this clever country did not get the message because from 1981 – 1995 water consumption rose by another 50%.

We punished the basin rivers further by placing in excess of 20,000 obstructions that consist of road crossing, locks, and barrages so that it completely lost connectivity.

Some locks and barrages are needed for water management but the other 19,500 interfere with the rivers connectivity and stop or at least restrict fish passage and environmental flows that are the lifeblood of the system.

For many thousands of years the Lakes and Coorong have been regularly blessed with two pulses of environmental flows each year.

The first April, May, June, July ---- and the other in August, September, October and November.

Over time it suited some species like mullet, congollis to use the autumn winter rains to induce spawning whilst most other species of fish, birds and plants use the spring flows.

The autumn flows come from our local tributaries from the eastern Mount Lofty ranges and also the monsoons down the Darling.

It is said that the Darling only provides 17% of the end of system flows; in fact most Queenslander and Northern New South Wales people say it never reaches the Murray and they are definitely working to make sure it doesn't.

But the fact is that 17% is and average over 114 years.

There are many times when the Darling provides over 50% to the end of system flows.

Some times averages do not tell the truth.

Well we have dammed up our tributaries and unless it is a monster flood the Darling never reaches us, placing the many fish species including congollis on the endangered list.

In fact 26 of the 46 native species in the basin are recognised as either rare or threatened and there are many localised extinctions.

To add to this pressure there are 12 introduced fish species that make up 70% of the biomass.

The spring flows are much the same unless it is a major flood then it rarely reaches the Lakes and Coorong.

The large unrestricted flows that we are receiving at this moment cannot be consumed or stored and so they are cleansing and repairing our environment as I speak.

There are however some prominent politicians who want to have a crack at harvesting these large flows by building more dams but surely common sense will prevail.

For 200 years white men in Australia have dived in at the deep end and then found that their solutions have on many occasions caused more problems than their worth or the problem has just shifted to another place.

These days it is well known of the benefits that floods provide to rivers and estuaries; not only to animals and plants but also to people who need to have a healthy environment to have a healthy lifestyle and well-being.

A recent study by CSIRO showed that a healthy Coorong is worth $4.3billion to Australia.

We are not living in the old country where there is an abundance of water, – this is Australia, where there has to be end of system flows or everything dies.

Much of our problem is that they are able to control the medium flows.

How many times do we hear of rain events interstate but they never reach us.

The basin plan, if it achieves anything, must in these medium flow events demand that all regions contribute to end of system flows.

If this is not achieved the system will only get flushed when like this year we are blessed with a large end of system flows that may happen once in 7 - 10 years.

The need for regular cleansing is so important otherwise the environment starts repairing itself and then salinity and pollution kills it.

A cycle that has devastating consequences.

Greed and mismanagement of water by states, local governments and consumers have placed the lower Murray in particular but also many interstate wetlands at the point of collapse.

Somehow we have to convince upstream people that the Lakes and Coorong and the Murray Mouth belong to Australia not just South Australia.

Ladies and gentlemen you do not know how close in 2010 the lakes were to being Australia's Aral Sea.

We were a whisker from total collapse.

The area was a mess.

Two thirds of the Coorong dead.

This is the area that just twenty years ago was producing mullet, flounder, black bream and a myriad of none consumptive fish that fed the migratory birds and the local birds.

Aquatic plants and even brine shrimp died as the water became five times saltier than the sea.

The one-third left changed from being estuarine to marine and many marine animals impacted badly on native Coorong animals.

Dredges of course were working full time just to keep the Mouth open.

The lakes were at one and an half metres below sea level.

The toxins, nutrients, algae and the two million tonnes of salt that comes from interstate every year built up over four years and could not be released out through the mouth.

Thousands of turtles, hectares of mussels, native water rats, fish, aquatic plants, invertebrates, and macro-invertebrates suffered unbelievably and died.

Terrestrial animals in that need to drink fresh water suffered the same fate.

Saline water prevented irrigation, grape vines died, dairy farms were lost, business went bankrupt and the people were suffering in many ways, watching their environment die before their eyes.

"It's the drought – the worst drought in recorded history," people upstream cried.

Well I am telling you it was much more than the drought.

It has been gradually dying for at least thirty years.

I believe that under natural conditions the Murray Darling Basin environment can easily survive droughts and that is proven this year when plants are greener, insects and animals are prolific and fish and invertebrates are in continual spawning mode.

It was greedy over allocation, plus the drought that soaked up those medium flows, and there was little or in most cases no thought for the environment.

The drought just made it harder to recover.

The usual happened, water for critical human need and reduced percentage for irrigation and bugger all for the environment.

In the eastern states within the basin the catch cry is that the Act favours the environment and the social impacts should be at least equal.

The facts are that since white man's arrival the environment has always come last.

I would cherish it to be equal with the social impact, remembering that irrigation uses 70% of the water.

Even in so-called drought years water used to flow out the Mouth and it had no trouble staying open.

In my opinion we have made many mistakes in water management but the establishment of hundreds of cotton farms was the final nail in the coffin.

I am not saying cotton should not be grown because we are told per megalitre of water cotton produces more value but unless we can farm sustainably we do not have the right to farm or we will follow the long history of irrigation areas around the world where eventually greed has brought them to an abrupt end.

I have been yelling at the top of my voice for many years that the Mouth is the kidney of the Murray Darling Basin.

Everything drains from thousands of kilometres away to the Murray Mouth.

Block it up and eventually the whole system dies.

Like-wise Lake Alexandrina needs to be large because it is the liver of the Basin.

It has to sort out the 2 million tonnes of salt per year, the constant threat of black water, the overloads of nutrients, the algae, and the toxins before it enters the more fragile Coorong.

Lake Alexandrina is the buffer zone.

It is also the refrigerator for the Coorong because it manufactures the food, particularly bony bream, stores it and hopefully is able to release it for extended periods.

A few years ago it was common to get 3,000-4,000 gigalitres out the Mouth per year, now natural flooding has been reduced to 25% of that.

So, how much is enough water for the Lakes and Coorong?

It is important to remember that even if the new basin plan was able to achieve the 3-4000gigs of water for the environment many of our wetlands would be still in poor health.

This large amount of water has to service the whole Murray Darling Basin.

I know much of it will be used for multiple sites on the way down but I would be surprised if a 1,000 gigalitres would reach the Mouth on a medium flow year.

I believe that it will take 2,000gigalitres to keep the Mouth open without dredges.

The Coorong, Lower Lakes and Murray Mouth committee decided that salinity in Lake Alexandrina is the key to maintaining lower salinity in Lake Albert and the Coorong and so they recommended it be kept between 700-1,000 EC units.

This would take absolute minimum of 650gigs per year with a rolling 3 year average of 2,000-4,000gigs and the larger unrestricted flows of 6,000-10,000 for a complete flush every 3 – 7 years.

There is no doubt that we have to be smarter and manage the estuary with less water and use the barrages to simulate larger environmental flows.

Providing we keep the lake level at between, .5AHD and .85AHD so that water does not have to be used for topping it up and we can pulse an initial large burst of water in the first new moon in August to ignite the reproduction mode and then dribble the rest of allocation through to January I believe this would keep the estuary alive until the next unrestricted flow.

When there is an abundance of water it is common sense to use all barrages because that is nature's way, but if the end of system flow is restricted the environment; especially the Coorong, gets better value if the Murray water is released from the Tauwitchere barrage.

Water from the south east drains would help but be absolutely sure it is the Murray that has to save the Coorong.

In the south east at Bald Hill 40 million dollars have been future spent on drains to put southeast water back into the Coorong.

This year, which has been better than average rainfall, 20 gigs flowed through Salt Creek from Bald Creek into the Coorong.

This may seem a lot of water but to put it into perspective evaporation from the southern lagoon of the Coorong is 80 gigs and this additional Salt Creek water is poor quality already containing 20,000EC units of salt.

More work is planned to divert drain M to receive an overall total of 60gigs however locals believe it is not practicable as Lake George needs much of this water to keep it flushed or it too will finish up just like the Coorong.

There is only one way to freshen the Coorong and that is with water from the Murray, preferably not in the middle of winter when the Coorong is full, but in the autumn or spring when high tides plus the low tides and southwest winds will push it well down the Coorong.

In regards to climate change there is no doubt humans have affected our climate and the world has to do something about it.

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Predictions are always difficult especially when it is about our future but there certainly seems to be some super charged events in recent times that man has at least impacted on.

The problem is that with the same facts, the same computer models, the same information, scientist will come up with diversely different outcomes and so it makes planning very difficult.

Some scientists say less rain in the autumn; others say more rain in the northern basin.

What they do agree on is that end of system flows will be less in the southern basin, some say as high as 19% less.

Having said all of that I think it is too early to make major changes to the basin plan because of climate change.

There is no doubt in my mind that water management decisions will potentially have greater impacts on our rivers' largest problem, salinity, far greater than climate change.

Australia's land leaks salt and nutrients when cleared and 90% comes from over the borders.

Enough salt to fill the Melbourne cricket ground to the top of the goal posts ends up in the lakes every year and so you can imagine the death and destruction this causes to the ecology if it cannot be naturally cleansed out through the Murray Mouth.

Can irrigators survive with less water?

I found it very interesting that in the last year of the drought 2008-2009 with 40% less water for irrigators' production in the Murray Darling Basin dropped by 1%.

There seems to be a massive message in this and surely those people who did well in the drought should be used as examples.

Australian farmers' intelligent water conservation, crop selection, buying and selling water proved what can be done with less water and so purchasing water for the should be accelerated and brought from areas that stopped being irrigated because of drought, and encouragement should be given to dry land farming.

Many towns on the rivers were built on industries other than irrigation and during droughts they survived and kept on providing and producing and this should not be ignored or forgotten.

Tourism plays a major part in river towns but people do not come to see temporary weirs or bunds, they do not come to see the world record 1,000km of algae bloom on the Darling nor do they come to see dead red gums or the deadly black water surges.

They do come to walk in the forests, to watch birds, to fish, to yabby, to boat, to hire houseboats, to caravan and to camp in a tent.

We do not want tourism to impact on the fragile environment of the basin but I believe it is pretty well untapped and could go part way to replacing any production lost by water buybacks.

The most disappointing part of my tenure as a BCC member is that I have spent a lot of time convincing interstate people as to why we should not pull out the barrages and let in sea water.

I have written a number of papers, each better than the last, proving in my mind at least, that the lakes were always fresh, but a few people will not listen to reason because they want the 600gigs of water that evaporates from the lakes for themselves.

"It's the way it used to be", they say.

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Nothing is the way it used to be.

If you stopped irrigation, pulled out all the locks, blew up the dams, then maybe you could take out the barrages.

We know that's not going to happen and it's plain to locals that if barrages were removed the Murray Mouth could not provide enough seawater to keep the Coorong and Lakes fresh.

The Wellington weir would have to built to protect the Adelaide water supply and so stop the very important wind tides that distributes food and genetics, oxygenates water, including black water, Lake Albert would go hyper saline as would the west side of Lake Alexandrina, in the Boggy and Dog Lakes, but worst of all you would shift the Coorong to where freshwater meets salt water at the new Wellington weir, an open lake, no place for an estuary.

Look, the example has already been set in the Coorong where lack of fresh water has two thirds.

The Wellington to Blanchetown reach would become the new problem area with black water and the annual 2 million tonnes of salt to contend with.

We have absolute proof that the lakes have over thousands of years been fresh water lakes for at least 97% of time.

The remaining 3% is when large, large doses of salt came down the river.

Sceptics say "but we used to catch salt water fish at Murray Bridge".

Sure estuary fish swim upstream to induce breeding, rid themselves of parasites and to feed.

They have been doing it all over the world for thousands of years and in fact in this large flow we are catching black bream, bullnose mullet, Atlantic salmon, garfish, mulloway and flounder well out into the fresh water of Lake Alexandrina.

The barrages were built in the 1920-30's because in the early 1900's the Chaffey brothers were irrigating with 2,000gigs at Renmark and Mildura and so less pressure allowed salt water to creep into the Lakes.

They were built to save the fresh water lakes and they are still doing that to this very day.

In regards to evaporation, no matter where water is stored it evaporates, and the further north you go the faster it evaporates.

Incidentally man-made turkey dams in northern New South Wales evaporate more water than our natural lakes in the Lower Murray.

I believe the answer to the health of the river is the Commonwealth buying water from willing sellers and under scientific guidance returning it to the river replicating natural environmental flows and for the Commonwealth to pay for a cost effective infrastructure program that improves irrigation practises and from the water savings at least half to be returned to the river.

This is what the Act of 2007 states and what every one agreed to.

The Act is fine and should not be touched.

Start amending it and all the money spent on it will be wasted.

It was not designed to control the high Australian dollar, or commodity prices, or small farms that have accepted the exit grants, nor fix the problems of irrigation trusts.

It was designed to give the environment a fair deal; the environment that we have abused for a century.

Minister Burke says he wants the basin plan to be defensible, well unless science is used I think he will get a few arguments and find it hard to defend.

Surely when best science has been used you cannot just pick a number.

Much blame has been attributed to the Murray Darling Basin Authority board, to staff, and to scientists by stakeholders in particular about the guide.

They blamed lack of communication, not taking locals advice, wrong information and much, much more.

Really, every one had the opportunity to contribute and if you did not know what was happening you must have been on another planet.

Maybe the Murray Darling Basin Authority could have emphasised louder why water needed to be bought back.

Maybe they should have emphasised that in many regions sustainable diversion limits had been nearly achieved through buy- backs.

Maybe they should have emphasised that water buy-backs were not compulsory.

Perhaps there could have been a better, more visible plan of how the sustainable diversion limits water was going to be used in the Environmental Watering Plan.

In hindsight we have many geniuses, but really it boils down to when we are not happy, let's change the rules so white man can get a better deal.

We all seem to forget that the rivers' troubles were caused by politicians who believed it was an endless pot of gold and we could go on forever taking water from it.

Look science has told us what is needed and incidentally very little has been challenged since the release of the guide.

They have given the figures and now politicians and irrigators want to negotiate with the environment for a better deal.

Tell me, with the present state of the environment, which of the endangered species do they want to sacrifice for their better deal.

The main reason for a basin plan is the need to sustain an environmentally healthy working river system across the basin, supporting basin communities, economies and the environment as well as contribute some water to meet ecological needs of down stream regions.

The first part of that statement is certainly taking place, it's the let a bit go for down stream ecosystems that is holding things up.

It is really important that the basin plan is for the Murray Darling Basin as a whole, not just state by state or region by region.

If locals have control of their water management within in their region what hope is there for end of system flows?

They will passionately look after their local environment and local consumers but they will have little interest in environments down-stream.

I believe that we have to work towards an independent Murray-Darling Basin Authority with total control.

Let parochial management be seen for what it is; the reason why we are over-allocated.

Ladies and gentlemen the Godsend that the lakes are living at this moment is just wonderful.

By day and night we can see her healing.

The large unrestricted flow is slowly but surely clearing the build up of unwanted material.

Flushing it out to sea.

Even the Coorong is feeling the benefit with fish moving further into the South Lagoon.

It has been an exceptionally long river and if we are blessed with a good winter it could run to next Christmas.

An old salt like me just wonders that if we do not get it right when the next crisis will immerge.

Will death and destruction return or have we learnt our lesson and will we get a fair share of those medium flows to keep our environment alive?

In 2009 I thought the basin plan was travelling well, and then came the election that resulted in Independents having the balance of power.

The retirement of the Chair of the Murray Darling Basin Authority and even the wonderful rains that gave the impression of "what are you worried about, it was just the drought".

Then Victorian elections and now the NSW landslide elections and the success of the Nationals based mostly in the basin.

Hopefully all these obstacles will make it a better plan.

The appointment of Craig Knowles as the new Chair of the MDBA is a genuine attempt to salvage a basin plan from the discredit that well organised, very loud irrigator groups and their associated allies put on the MDBA Board, the staff and scientists.

Very hard working, creditable people put enormous effort into trying to create a sustainable working river only to be abused, sworn at and much worse, by in many cases, ill informed stakeholders.

I have been to all the 19 regions in the basin and without fail they all agree that the basin has been over allocated, but not in their patch.

"Upstream or down stream, that is where the problem is", they say, "but certainly not in our patch".

Mr Knowles is aware of this and he is also aware that there is a silent majority who want a sustainable basin.

Let us get this god dam plan up and running before we lose more.

It is our obligation to protect 60million years of evolution.

The river is more than a sewer, it is more than a pipe that provides water, and it's more than a playground.

It is a wonderful living ecosystem that provides habitat to many living things.

It is our obligation to pass it on.

Henry Jones